

ONE ACT

PLAYS

By CHRISTOPHER MORLEY





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ONE ACT PLAYS

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Plays

ONE ACT PLAYS

ONE ACT PLAYS

BY
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY



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THURSDAY EVENING

To Dorothy Stockbridge

CHARACTERS

GORDON JOHNS, *a Young Business Man*

LAURA, *Mrs. Gordon Johns*

MRS. SHEFFIELD, *Laura's Mother*

MRS. JOHNS, *Gordon's Mother*

THURSDAY EVENING

SCENE

A small suburban kitchen in the modest home of Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Johns. A meal has recently been cooked, as is shown by a general confusion of pots and pans and dish-cloths. At the rear, an icebox standing in the corner. Rear, centre, two shelved cabinets, one containing groceries and household sundries, the other dishes and glassware. Rear, L, an oil range. Some baby linen and very small shirts (such as would be suitable for a child of about ten months) are hanging on a clothes-horse near the stove. Door R leads out to back porch; there are two windows in R wall, one each side of door. Door L to dining-room. At the corner in the rear, L, door opening on back stairs, which ascend to upper parts of the house. Down stage, L, against side wall, a sink and oilcloth covered drain-board or shelf beside it. In the centre of stage a small table covered with oilcloth. A kitchen chair in corner, down R.

When the scene opens, Gordon and Laura are carrying in soiled dishes through door, L. They come in and out several times, making methodical arrangements for cleaning up. They pile the dishes on the shelf by the sink. Gordon takes dishpan from a hook under the sink, and fills it with hot water from the kettle on the stove. Laura,

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who is an attractive little person, aged about twenty-three, is in that slightly tense condition of a young hostess who has had a long and trying day with house and baby, and has also cooked and served a dinner for four.

GORDON

All right, Creature, just wait till I light my pipe and we'll polish this up. (*Lights pipe and rolls up shirtsleeves.*)

LAURA (*taking an apron from chair in corner*)

Put this on first. That's the only decent pair of trousers you've got.

(*Enter Mrs. Sheffield, carrying dishes.*)

MRS. SHEFF

Now you children run along and take it easy. I'll do all this.

LAURA

No, no, Mother. You go and talk to Mrs. Johns. (*Pointedly.*) Don't let her come in here.

MRS. SHEFF (*ultramaternally*)

Poor baby, she's tired. You've been on your feet all day, now let Mother wash up for you. That was a big dinner to cook.

LAURA

No tireder than you are, Mother darling. You cooked lunch.

GORDON

Both of you clear out; I can get this done in no time.

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MRS. SHEFF (*patting Laura's cheek*)

Busy with the baby all afternoon, and then cooking such a delicious dinner—— Dearie, won't you let Mother do this for you?

LAURA

There isn't room in this kitchen for everybody——
(*Enter Mrs. Johns, carrying dishes.*)

MRS. JOHNS

Gordon, you and Laura go and rest. Let the two grandmothers——

GORDON

Now listen, little people, this is my job. I always wash up on Thursday evenings——

MRS. JOHNS

You go and read your newspaper. I can see you're all fagged out after that long day in the office——

MRS. SHEFF (*to Laura*)

Please go and lie down, Baby. You're so tired.

LAURA (*with waning patience*)

You two go and amuse yourselves; Gordon and I'll attend to this. (*They gently eject the two mothers-in-law.*)

GORDON

Come on, now, the good old system! (*He takes the small table from centre of stage, and puts it carefully midway between sink and dish cabinet. Takes chair from corner, down R, and sets it beside table. Laura sits down on chair and wipes silverware and dishes as he hands them to her after washing.*)

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LAURA

The silver first, while the water's clean.

GORDON

Right. We make a pretty good team at this, don't we?

LAURA (*holds up a small silver jug*)

That darling old cream jug. Mother used that when she was a little girl.

GORDON

I love our little Thursday evening suppers. I think they're more fun than any other night.

LAURA

I'm glad, Gordie.

GORDON

We get better grub on Thursdays, when Ethel goes out, than we ever do when she's in.

LAURA

I tried to have everything specially nice to-night. Some visitors are very critical.

GORDON

It was lovely. I'm afraid it was hard for you, Creature, to have Mother come just now. (*A short pause.*) Especially when *your* mother was here.

LAURA

Didn't she know Mother was here?

GORDON

No. I hadn't told her. You see your mother is here so much more often. I didn't know your

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mother would still be here. I was afraid Mother might be a little hurt——

LAURA

Mother helps me a great deal. I think it's a queer thing if a wife can't have her mother stay with her once in a while——

GORDON (*aware of danger, changes the subject*)

Ye Gods, Ethel has cracked the Copenhagen platter. (*Laura is silent.*) That's one of the set Mother gave us when we were married.

LAURA

It's a stock pattern. You can get another at any department store.

GORDON

I'll bet that coon didn't empty the icebox pan before she went. I never saw a cook yet who could remember to do that——

LAURA

If you had to go out and hunt for them you wouldn't be so particular. She's better than no one.

GORDON (*goes to icebox and removes a large, brimming pan from under it*)

What did I tell you! (*The water slops over from pan as he carries it gingerly to sink and empties it. He replaces the pan under icebox.*)

LAURA

You'd better heat some more water. You've poured that ice-water into the dishpan.

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GORDON (*getting a little peevish; refills kettle and puts it on stove*)

It's perfectly absurd not having any pantry to keep the icebox in. In here, the heat of the stove melts the ice right away. (*Goes back to icebox and slams its doors shut.*) Of course, she never keeps the doors properly closed. (*He returns to sink and resumes dishwashing.*) It's a funny thing.

LAURA

What is?

GORDON

Why, that a presumably intelligent coon can't understand the doors of an icebox are meant to be kept tight shut, to save ice. What does she suppose those little clamps are for? (*Laura is silent. There is a pause, while Gordon scrapes portions of food off the soiled plates. He examines some of these plates rather carefully, and picks out several large pieces of meat, lettuce, butter, etc., which he puts on one plate at one side. Then he seems to resume his good humour and relights his pipe.*) Well, it's jolly to have both the grandmothers here together, isn't it?

LAURA

Gordon, dear, put the silver away in the sideboard before it gets wet again. (*He gathers up silver from the table in front of her and exit L. Laura steps outside door R, and returns, bringing garbage can, which she puts down by the sink. She begins to wash dishes, and sees the plate of odds and ends which Gordon has carefully put to one*

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side. She scrapes its contents into the garbage pail. While she is washing, Gordon enters, L.)

GORDON

Now, Creature, let me do that. You don't want to spoil those pretty hands. (*Takes them, with an attempt to be affectionate.*)

LAURA

I guess it isn't any worse for them than washing the baby's things.

GORDON

Come on, old man, let me. (*Gently removes her from sink, and pushes her to the chair by the table. She sits down and wipes dishes as he hands them to her.*) It doesn't take long when there are two of us.

LAURA

Gordie, these dishes aren't properly clean. You can't get that grease off without hot water.

GORDON

~~—~~ I guess that kettle's hot by now. (*To stove, feels water in kettle.*) Give it a minute longer. (*Stands by stove and puffs at his pipe. In a moment of false security, he foolishly reopens a dangerous topic.*) You know, I'm a little worried about Mother.

LAURA (*putting away dishes*)
Why?

GORDON

I don't think she's as well as usual. She hardly ate any of her salad.

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LAURA (*turns as though about to say something, but checks herself and pauses a moment. This time it is she who tries honourably to avert the gathering storm*)

Oh, Gordie, I forgot to tell you! Junior drank out of a cup to-day—the first time!

GORDON

He did! The little rascal!

LAURA

Look, here's the cup. (*Shows a small silver cup.*)

GORDON (*affectionately, putting his arm around her*)

Well, well. (*Looks at cup.*) What cup is that? I don't seem to remember it——

LAURA

Why—Mother brought it with her. She used it when she was a baby.

GORDON

Where's that nice old christening mug of mine? I think Junior would like to use that once in a while, too.

LAURA

I put it away, dear. I was afraid Ethel might dent it.

GORDON (*takes kettle from stove, goes back to sink*)

I hope Mother isn't feeling poorly. I noticed at supper——

LAURA

When hot meat is served, refined people usually call it *dinner*——

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GORDON (*looks at her cautiously, and suddenly seems to realize that they are on the edge of an abyss*)

Now, honey, you're tired. You go and rest, I'll finish up here.

LAURA

No, thank you. I like to see that everything gets cleaned up properly. Someone might come snooping out here, and then there'd be hints about my housekeeping. Of course, I'll admit I wasn't brought up to be a cook——

GORDON (*seeks inspiration by relighting his pipe, and takes up a handsome silver coffee-pot*)

One thing I never can make out is, how to prevent coffee grounds from going down the sink. (*He talks desperately, trying to tide over the mutually realized danger point.*) Perhaps if I could invent some kind of a little coffee-ground strainer I'd make our fortune. That coffee was delicious, Creature.

LAURA

Take care of that urn, it's one of the few handsome things we have.

GORDON

It is a beauty.

LAURA

Jack Davis gave it to me——

GORDON (*puts it down with distaste*)

I guess I'd better attend to the garbage.

LAURA (*nervously*)

It's all fixed.

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GORDON

I always like Thursdays because that's the one evening Ethel doesn't get a chance to throw away about five dollars' worth of good food.

LAURA

I fixed the garbage. You can put the pail outside.

GORDON (*hunting among plates on the shelf beside sink*)

Where's that plate I put here? There was a lot of perfectly good stuff I saved——

LAURA (*blows up at last*)

Well, if you think I'm going to keep a lot of half-eaten salad your mother picked over——

GORDON (*seizes garbage pail, lifts it up to the sink and begins to explore its contents. His fuse also is rapidly shortening*)

My Lord, it's no wonder we never have any money to spend if we chuck half of it away in waste. (*Picking out various selections.*) Waste! Look at that piece of cheese, and those potatoes. You could take those things, and some of this meat, and make a nice economical hash for lunch——

LAURA

It's a wonder you wouldn't get a job as a scavenger. I never *heard* of a husband like you, rummaging through the garbage pail.

GORDON (*blows up*)

Do you know what the one unforgivable sin is? The sin against the Holy Ghost? It's *Waste*!

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It makes me wild to think of working and working like a dog, and half of what I earn just thrown away by an ignorant coon. Look at this, just look at it! (*Displays a grisly object.*) There's enough meat on that bone to make soup. And ye gods, here's that jar of anchovy paste! (*Holds it up.*) I thought you got that for me as a little treat. I wondered where it had gone to. Why, I hadn't eaten more than just the top of it.

LAURA

Well, you left it, and left it, and it got mildewed.

GORDON

Scrape it off. A little mildew won't hurt anybody. There'll be mildew on my bank account if this kind of thing goes on. (*Still examining garbage pail.*) Look here, about half a dozen slices of bread. What's the matter with *them*, I'd like to know.

LAURA

I think it's the most disgusting thing I ever heard of. To go picking over the garbage pail like that. You attend to your affairs and I'll attend to mine.

GORDON

I guess throwing away good, hard-earned money is my affair, isn't it?

LAURA

You're always quick enough to find fault. I know Ethel's careless, but she's the best I can get out here in this godforsaken suburb. Maybe

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you'll be good enough to find me a better servant. A well-trained girl wouldn't work in this old dump, where there isn't even gas. You don't seem to know when you're lucky. You come back at night and find your home well cared for and me slaving over a hot dinner, and do you ever say a word of thanks? No, all you can think of is finding fault. I can't imagine how you were brought up. Your mother——

GORDON

Just leave my mother out of it. I guess she didn't spoil me the way yours did you. Of course, I wasn't an only daughter——

LAURA

I wish you had been. Then I wouldn't have married you.

GORDON

I suppose you think that if you'd married Jack Davis or some other of those profiteers you'd never have had to see the inside of a kitchen——

LAURA

If Junior grows up with your disposition, all I can say is, I hope he'll never get married.

GORDON

If he gets married, I hope it'll be to some girl who understands something about economy——

LAURA

If he gets married, I hope he'll be man enough not to be always finding fault——

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GORDON

Well, he *won't* get married! I'll put him wise to what marriage means, fussing like this all the time——

LAURA

Yes, he *will* get married. He *shall* get married!

GORDON

Oh, this is too absurd——

LAURA

He *shall* get married, just to be a humiliating example to his father. I'll bring him up the way a husband *ought* to be.

GORDON

In handcuffs, I suppose——

LAURA

And his wife won't have to sit and listen to perpetual criticism from his mother——

GORDON

If you're so down on mothers-in-law, it's queer you're anxious to be one yourself. The expectant mother-in-law!

LAURA

All right, be vulgar, I dare say you can't help it.

GORDON

Great Scott, what did you think marriage was like, anyway? Did you expect to go through life having everything done for you, without a little hard work to make it interesting?

LAURA

Is it necessary to shout?

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GORDON

Now let me tell you something. Let's see if you can ratify it from your extensive observation of life. Is there anything in the world so cruel as bringing up a girl in absolute ignorance of housework, believing that all her days she's going to be waited on hand and foot, and that marriage is one long swoon of endearments——

LAURA

There's not much swooning while you're around.

GORDON

Why, I believe you actually think your life is wrecked if you aren't being petted and praised every minute. You pretend to think marriage is so sacred and yet you're buffaloed by a few greasy dishes. I like my kind of sacredness better than yours, and that's the sacredness of common sense. Marriage ought not to be performed before an altar, but before a kitchen sink.

LAURA (*furiously*)

I ought to have known that oil and water won't mix. I ought to have known that a vulgar, selfish, conceited man couldn't make a girl happy who was brought up in a refined family. I was a Sheffield, and why I ever became a Johns is more than I can imagine. Johns—I suppose that's camouflage for Jones. You're too common, too ordinary, to know when you're lucky. You get a charming, aristocratic wife and expect her to grub along like a washerwoman. You try to crush all the life and spirit out of her.

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You ought to have married an icebox—that's the only thing in this house you're really attentive to.

GORDON

Now listen——

LAURA (*will not be checked*)

Talk about being spoiled—why, your mother babies you so, you think you're the only man on earth. (*Sarcastically.*) Her poor, over-worked boy, who tries so hard and gets all fagged out in the office and struggles so nobly to support his family! I wonder how you'd like to run this house and bear a child and take care of it and shuffle along with an ignorant coon for a maid and then cook a big dinner and be sneered at and never a word of praise. All you can think of is picking over the garbage pail and finding fault——

GORDON (*like a fool*)

I didn't find fault. I found some good food being wasted.

LAURA

All right, if you love the garbage pail better than you do your wife, you can live with it. (*Flings her dishtowel on the floor and exits, L.*)

(*Gordon stands irresolutely at the sink, and makes a few gloomy motions among the unfinished dishes. He glares at the garbage can. Then he carefully gathers those portions of food that he had chosen as being still usable, contemplates them grimly, then puts them on a plate, and, after some hesita-*

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tion, puts the plate in the icebox. He takes the garbage can and puts it outside door, R. He returns into the kitchen, but then a sudden fit of anger seizes him.)

GORDON

It's always the way! (Tears off apron, throws it on the floor, and exits R, slamming door.)

(After a brief pause, the door at the rear, opening onto the back stairs, is cautiously opened, and Mrs. Sheffield enters quietly. She takes one swift look around the disordered kitchen, picks up dish-towel and apron from the floor, and sets to work rapidly to clean up. Then the back stairs door is again opened in the same stealthy way, and Mrs. Johns enters. The two ladies seem to take each other's measure with instinctive shrewdness, and fall into a silent, businesslike team-play in putting things to rights. Mrs. Johns takes charge at the sink, and the remaining dishes spin under her capable hands. Mrs. Sheffield takes them from her, rapidly polishes them, and puts them away on the shelves. There is unconscious comedy in the trained precision and labour-saving method of their actions, which are synchronized so that every time Mrs. Johns holds out a washed dish, Mrs. Sheffield is moving back from the cabinet, ready to receive it. They work like automatons; for perhaps two minutes not a word is said, and the two seem, by searching side-glances, to be probing each other's mood.)

MRS. JOHNS

If it wasn't so tragic I'd laugh. (A pause, during which they work busily.)

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MRS. SHEFF

If it wasn't so comic I'd cry. (*Another pause.*)
I guess it's my fault. Poor Laura, I'm afraid
I *have* spoiled her.

MRS. JOHNS

My fault, I think. Two mothers-in-law at once
is too much for any young couple. I didn't
know you were here, or I wouldn't have come.

MRS. SHEFF

Laura is so dreadfully sensitive, poor child——

MRS. JOHNS

Gordon works so hard at the office. You know
he's trying to get promoted to the sales depart-
ment, and I suppose it tells on his nerves——

MRS. SHEFF

If Laura could afford to have a nurse to help her
with the baby she wouldn't get so exhausted——

MRS. JOHNS

Gordon says he wants to take out some more in-
surance, that's why he worries so about econ-
omy. It isn't for himself, he's really very
unselfish——

MRS. SHEFF (*a little tartly*)

Still, I do think that sometimes—— (*They
pause and look at each other quickly.*) My gra-
cious, we'll be at it ourselves if we don't look
out! (*She goes to the clothes-horse and rearranges
the garments on it. She holds up a lilliputian
shirt, and they both smile.*)

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MRS. JOHNS

That darling baby! I hope he won't have poor Gordon's quick temper. It runs in the Johns family, I'm afraid. I was an Armstrong before I married Gordon's father—I didn't know what temper was until I married—either my own or his.

MRS. SHEFF

I was a Thomson—Thomson without the P, you know, from Rhode Island. All families are hot tempered. All husbands' families, anyway.

MRS. JOHNS

Gordon's father used to say that Adam and Eve didn't know when they were well off. He said that was why they called it the Garden of Eden.

MRS. SHEFF

Why?

MRS. JOHNS

Because there was no mother-in-law there.

MRS. SHEFF

Poor children, they have such a lot to learn! I really feel ashamed, Mrs. Johns, because Laura is an undisciplined little thing, and I'm afraid I've always petted her too much. She had such a lot of attention before she met Gordon, and was made so much of, it gave her wrong ideas.

MRS. JOHNS

I wish Gordon was a little younger, I'd like to turn him up and spank him. He's dreadfully stubborn and tactless——

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MRS. SHEFF

But I'm afraid I *did* make a mistake. Laura was having such a good time as a girl, I was always afraid she'd have a hard awakening when she married. But Mr. Sheffield had a good deal of money at that time, and he used to say, "She's only young once, let her enjoy herself."

MRS. JOHNS

My husband was shortsighted, too. He had had to skimp so, that he brought up Gordon to have a terror of wasting a nickel.

MRS. SHEFF

Very sensible. I wish Mr. Sheffield had had a little more of that terror. I shall have to tell him what his policy has resulted in. But really, you know, when I heard them at it, I could hardly help admiring them. (*With a sigh.*) It brings back old times!

MRS. JOHNS

So it does! (*A pause.*) But we can't let them go on like this. A little vigorous quarrelling is good for everybody. It's a kind of spiritual laxative. But they carry it too far.

MRS. SHEFF

They're awfully ingenious. They were even bickering about Junior's future mother-in-law. I suppose she's still in school, whoever she may be!

MRS. JOHNS

Being a mother-in-law is almost as painful as being a mother.

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MRS. SHEFF

I think every marriage ought to be preceded by a treaty of peace between the two mothers. If they understand each other, everything will work out all right.

MRS. JOHNS

You're right. When each one takes sides with her own child, it's fatal.

MRS. SHEFF (*lowering her voice*)

Look here, I think I know how we can make them ashamed of themselves. Where are they now?

MRS. JOHNS (*goes cautiously to door L, and peeps through*)

Laura is lying on the couch in the living-room, I think she's crying—her face is buried in the cushions.

MRS. SHEFF

Splendid. That means she's listening with all her ears—— (*Tiptoes to window, R.*) I can't see Gordon, but I think he's walking round the garden——

MRS. JOHNS (*quietly*)

If we were to talk a little louder he'd sit on the back steps to hear it——

MRS. SHEFF

Exactly. Now listen! (*They put their heads together and whisper; the audience does not hear what is said.*)

THURSDAY EVENING

MRS. JOHNS

Fine! Oh, that's fine! (*Mrs. Sheffield whispers again, inaudible to the spectators.*) But wait a moment. Don't you think it would be better if *I* praise Laura and *you* praise Gordon? They won't expect that, and it might shame them——

MRS. SHEFF

No, no! Don't you see—— (*Whispers again, inaudibly.*)

MRS. JOHNS

You're right. Cunning as serpents and harmless as doves—— (*They carefully set both doors, L and R, ajar.*)

MRS. SHEFF

I only hope we won't wake the baby—— (*They return to the task of cleaning up, and talk very loud, in pretended quarrel.*)

MRS. JOHNS

Where do these dessert plates go?

MRS. SHEFF

On this shelf.

MRS. JOHNS

You're here so much more often than I, naturally you know Laura's arrangements better.

MRS. SHEFF

It's a lucky thing I *am* here. I don't know what poor Laura would do without me at such a dreadful time——

MRS. JOHNS

Poor Laura! I should say she's very fortunate, such a good husband——

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MRS. SHEFF

I think it's rather sad for a girl who has had as much as she has, to come down to this——

MRS. JOHNS

It's perfectly wonderful how Gordon has got on in business——

MRS. SHEFF

He ought to, with such a lovely home, run like a clock——

MRS. JOHNS

Yes. An alarm clock.

MRS. SHEFF

Well, I'm not going to see my daughter's happiness ruined——

MRS. JOHNS

I always knew he'd make some girl a fine husband——

MRS. SHEFF

Perhaps. But he seems to have picked the wrong girl. Laura has too much spirit to be bullied——

MRS. JOHNS

Well, perhaps it was all a mistake. Poor Gordon, he works so hard. I believe his hair is going white over his ears already.

MRS. SHEFF

Stuff! That's lather from where he shaved this morning. He's too slovenly to wash it off.

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MRS. JOHNS

It isn't right that a young man should have to slave the way he does—

MRS. SHEFF (*apparently in a passion*)

Do you think that business slavery can compare to household slavery? I think it's heart-rending to see an attractive girl like Laura shut up in a poky little house doing drudgery and tending a baby. Think of it, having to take care of her own baby! Why, it's an outrage. If Gordon was half a man, he'd get her a trained baby nurse so she wouldn't have to *look* at the poor little thing—

MRS. JOHNS (*scathing*)

Yes, how sad that Gordon should have to entrust his son to amateur care when it needs scientific attention.

MRS. SHEFF

Poor darling Laura—she never ought to have had a baby.

MRS. JOHNS

Gordon is too intellectual to be bothered with these domestic details. He ought to be able to concentrate on his work.

MRS. SHEFF (*coming close to Mrs. Johns, feigning great rage, but grimacing to show it is merely acting*) Well, if you don't think my daughter is good enough for your son, I can always take her home with *me*. I guess I can find room for her, and we can put the child in an institution. (*Both nearly laugh, but recover themselves.*)

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MRS. JOHNS

Don't worry. *I'll* take the child. He's a Johns anyway, not a Sheffield. And you just watch Gordon, when he's relieved of all this family worry and quarrelling. He'll make his mark in the world. He's too fine to be tied down by a wife that doesn't understand him.

MRS. SHEFF

Oh, how happy Laura will be to hear this. My sweet, clever, attractive, economical, sensible little girl, free at last. Her married life has been a nightmare. That great, hulking, selfish man has tried to trample all the joy out of her. He sha'n't do it.

MRS. JOHNS

I never heard of a young husband as self-sacrificing as Gordon. I don't believe he *ever* goes out for an evening with other men, and he *never* spends anything on himself——

MRS. SHEFF

I think the way Laura runs her little home is just wonderful. See how she struggles to keep her kitchen in order—this miserable, inconvenient little kitchen, no gas, no pantry, no decent help. I think it's *terrible* she has had to put up with so much—— (*They pause, and listen at the door, L. The kitchen is now spick and span. Mrs. Johns makes a gesture to indicate that Laura is taking it all in, offstage.*)

MRS. JOHNS

Well, then, it's all settled.

THURSDAY EVENING

MRS. SHEFF

Yes. As Laura's mother, I can't let her go on like this. A husband, a home, and a baby—it's enough to ruin any woman.

MRS. JOHNS

It's only fair to both sides to end it all. I never heard of such brutal hardships. Gordon can't fight against these things any longer. Throwing away a soup bone and three slices of bread! I wonder he doesn't go mad.

MRS. SHEFF

We've saved them just in time. (*They look at each other knowingly, with the air of those who have done a sound bit of work. Then they stealthily open the door at the rear, and exeunt up the back stairs.*)

(*There is a brief pause; then the door L opens like an explosion, and Laura bursts in. She stands for a moment, wild-eyed, stamps her foot in a passion. Then she seizes one of the baby shirts from the rack, and drops into the chair by the table, crying. She buries her head in her arms, concealing the shirt. Enter Gordon, R. He stands uncertainly, evidently feeling like a fool.*)

GORDON

I'm sorry, I—I left my pipe in here. (*Finds it by the sink.*)

LAURA (*her face still hidden*)

Oh, Gordie, *was* it all a mistake?

ONE ACT PLAYS

GORDON (*troubled, pats her shoulder tentatively*)

Now, listen, Creature, don't. You'll make yourself sick.

LAURA

I never thought I'd hear such things—from my own mother.

GORDON

I never heard such rot. They must be mad, both of them.

LAURA

Then you were listening, too——

GORDON

Yes. Why, they're deliberately trying to set us against each other.

LAURA

They wouldn't have *dared* speak like that if they had known we could hear. Gordon, I don't think it's *legal*——

GORDON

I'm afraid the law doesn't give one much protection against one's mothers.

LAURA (*miserably*)

I guess she's right. I *am* spoiled, and I *am* silly, and I *am* extravagant——

GORDON

Don't be silly, darling. That's crazy stuff. I'm *not* overworked, and even if I were I'd love it, for *you*——

THURSDAY EVENING

LAURA

I don't *want* a nurse for Junior. I wouldn't have one in the house. (*Sits up, dishevelled, and displays the small shirt she has been clutching.*) Gordon, I'm *not* an amateur! I love that baby and I *am* scientific. I keep a chart of his weight every week.

GORDON

Yes, I know, ducky, Gordon understands. Soon we'll be able to buy that scales you want, and we won't have to weigh him on the meat balance.

LAURA

Nobody can take away my darling baby——

GORDON

It was my fault, dear. I *am* obstinate and disagreeable——

LAURA

I'll speak to Ethel about the garbage——

GORDON

Ethel's all right. We're lucky to have her.

LAURA

Gordon, you mustn't work too hard. You know you're all I have—(*A sob*)—since Mother's gone back on me.

GORDON (*patting her*)

I think it's frightful, the things they said. What are they trying to do, break up a happy home?

LAURA

We *are* happy, aren't we?

ONE ACT PLAYS

GORDON

Well, I should say so. Did you ever hear me complain? (*Takes her in his arms.*)

LAURA

No, Gordie. It was cruel of them to try to make trouble between us—but, perhaps, some of the things they said——

GORDON

Were true?——

LAURA

Well, not exactly true, dear, but—interesting! —Your mother is right, you *do* have a hard time, and I'll try!

GORDON (*stops her*)

No, *your* mother is right. I've been a brute——

LAURA

I'm lucky to have such a husband—— (*They are silent a moment.*)

GORDON

I suppose you'll think it an awful anticlimax——

LAURA

What, dear?

GORDON

Suppose we have something to eat?

LAURA (*happily*)

Good idea. Quarrelling always makes me hungry. (*They go to the icebox.*) I didn't really get any supper to speak of, I was worrying about everything so——

THURSDAY EVENING

GORDON (*opening icebox*)

You mean *dinner*, honey—among refined people!

LAURA

Don't be a tease. Come on, we'll have a snack
—— (*She discovers Gordon's plate of left-overs.*)

GORDON

Throw out that junk—I was idiotic to save it.

LAURA

No, Gordie, you were quite right. We must save everything we can. Four or five heads of lettuce would make a new shirt for Junior.

GORDON (*bewildered*)

Lettuce?

LAURA

I mean, if we saved that much, it would make enough money to buy him a new little vest. He's getting so *enormous*—— (*She puts plate of left-overs on the table, with some other cold food.*)

GORDON

There, now, this is better. (*They sit down at table.*)

LAURA (*thoughtfully*)

You know, Gordie, we mustn't let them know we heard them.

GORDON

No, I suppose not. But it's hard to forgive that sort of talk.

ONE ACT PLAYS

LAURA

Even if they did say atrocious things, I think they really love us——

GORDON

We'll be a bit cold and stand-offish until things blow over.

LAURA (*complacently*)

If I'm ever a mother-in-law, I shall try to be *very* understanding——

GORDON

Yes, Creature. Do you remember why I call you Creature?

LAURA

Do I not?

GORDON

There was an adjective omitted, you remember.

LAURA

Oh, Gordie, that's one of the troubles of married life. So many of the nice adjectives seem to get omitted.

GORDON

Motto for married men: Don't run short of adjectives!—You remember what the adjective was?

LAURA

Tell me.

GORDON

Adorable. It was an abbreviation for Adorable Creature—— (*Holds her. They are both per-*

THURSDAY EVENING

fectly happy.) I love our little Thursday evenings.

LAURA (*partly breaks from his embrace*)

Sssh! (*Listens.*) Was that the baby?

CURTAIN

REHEARSAL

To Frank Shay

CHARACTERS

FREDA, *the Director*

CHRISTINE }
BARBARA } *the Players*
GERTRUDE }
SONIA }

MARJORIE, *the Stage Carpenter and Property Man*

REHEARSAL

SCENE

Rehearsal of a play to be given by a college dramatic club.

This is, as far as the setting is concerned, the easiest play to produce that you ever heard of. It requires only a bare stage, several plain chairs and a small table. Whatever is the natural and unadorned condition of your stage, leave it so. Nor are any special costumes necessary: the characters may attire themselves as suits their fancy and condition in life. The scene represents a rehearsal of an amateur play—I mean, a play performed by amateurs. As a matter of fact, the play they are at work on is supposed to be one of those Irish peasantry things. I have imagined the characters as being college girls, in whom is apparent that pleasing mixture of hilarity and importance characteristic of the sex in youth. However, it being to the author's interest that this play should be performed as frequently as possible, I will remark that by the change of a word or so here and there it is equally valid for girls' schools or clubs of high-spirited ladies.

The house lights having been turned off, and the footlights on, as usual, the audience, eager to be entertained, attentively waits the rise of the curtain. But before the curtain goes up, the gutter is again darkened; so that for a moment the audience thinks

ONE ACT PLAYS

some mistake has been made. This impression is perhaps confirmed when the curtain immediately rises upon the naked stage, which is adequately lit from above, but seems rather gloomy without the usual shine of the footlights.

Enter Freda, the director and manager, a brisk young person who enjoys her responsibility and takes it seriously. She carries a typescript, which she lays on the table at the front of the stage—the sacred little table which still holds an empty jug and a glass to remind one that not long ago some British celebrity spent a happy evening lecturing there. Freda moves the table to one side, and rapidly begins to arrange the chairs (which are standing in a row at the back) in a calculated pattern. She puts four of them close together toward the back of the stage; and two, a little distance apart, one behind the other, toward the right side; two, similarly, toward the left. Two or three chairs she sets with thoughtful precision in other places within the area thus marked out.

Enter Christine, Barbara, and Sonia, all carrying scripts.

FREDA

Hullo, where's Gertrude?

CHRISTINE

She'll be here, I guess.

FREDA

She'd better be, or I'll get someone else to do her part. She doesn't seem to realize we've got to play this thing a week from to-night.

REHEARSAL

BARBARA

Horrid thought!

FREDA

Well, while we await the prima donna, let's get to work. Now you know your lines, we can develop some business.

SONIA

I wish you'd picked out some other play; this is so dreadfully gloomy. It'll put the audience into a morbid melancholy.

CHRISTINE

Yes, and there's some pretty strong stuff in it, too. My father and mother are going to be here, and really, I think one ought to be careful about saying some of these things before parents——

FREDA

You ought to be glad it's gloomy. People don't respect you if you play comedy. This kind of thing is much more artistic. Besides, don't blame me. The Professor of English Literature chose it; I didn't.

CHRISTINE

I know—but just looking at things from the parents' standpoint, English Literature is awfully outspoken sometimes.

SONIA

I'm glad my people live so far away there's no chance of their coming to the show.

ONE ACT PLAYS

BARBARA

Think of me, I have to play the stricken old father, brooding over his shame. You try being a stricken old father——

FREDA

Come, now, we're wasting time.

(Enter Marjorie, carrying a hammer, a paint pot and brush, electric bulbs, a roll of canvas, and a dingy old suit of masculine garments.)

MARJORIE

Look here, what the deuce am I going to do for "moonlight through cottage window"? I can't get an arc light anywhere. D'you suppose ordinary frosted bulbs will do?

FREDA

Don't bother *me*. That's your affair. Lord knows I've got enough to manage.

MARJORIE

Well, will these do for the stricken old father?
(Holds out horrible old trousers and coat.)

FREDA

Hurrah! Just the thing. *(Takes trousers and holds them against Barbara, who views them with much distaste.)* A perfect fit!

BARBARA

Have I got to wear those things?

MARJORIE

I got them from the janitor.

REHEARSAL

FREDA

Better put them on right away, and get used to them.

(Barbara shudders.)

MARJORIE

Yes, atmosphere, local colour——

BARBARA

From the local coloured man. No, thanks.

(She deposits trousers gingerly at one side of stage.

Enter Gertrude, carrying script.)

GERTRUDE

Sorry to be late.

(Marjorie goes to rear of stage, and occupies herself quietly with paint and canvas while the rehearsal proceeds.)

FREDA

All right, now we can go ahead. I've put these chairs to show essentials of scenery. These *(indicating chairs at the back)* are the hearth. This *(to two chairs at one side)* is a door; this *(to two chairs on other side)* is another door. This *(to another chair, toward the rear)* is the window where the moonlight comes in. And here *(to another chair)* is the wheel-chair where the stricken old parent sits disconsolate.

CHRISTINE

There are going to be some stricken parents in the audience, too.

FREDA *(ignoring her)*

Now get the scene well in mind. *(Reads from her script:)* "A poor cottage in the Irish bogs.

ONE ACT PLAYS

At the back, a faint glimmer of a scanty fire of peat on the hearth, with a pile of kelp drying beside it."

MARJORIE

Where am I going to get any kelp? What is kelp, anyway?

FREDA

Seaweed.

MARJORIE

I wonder if spinach would be all right?

FREDA (*continues to read*)

"Through rear window, a clear beam of moonlight. In a wheel-chair by a lamp sits Shawn O'Connell, a stricken old man, reading the Bible. The setting indicates an atmosphere of extreme wretchedness and misery. From the shadows near the hearth, where Norah has flung herself prostrate in despair, comes an occasional low keening." (*Christine and Sonia look humorously at Gertrude, who plays the part of Norah.*) Are you ready? Places! (*Barbara sits down in one of the chairs; Gertrude, with a shamefaced air, lies down on the chairs assembled at the back, Christine and Sonia retire to one side of the stage, off the chair-marked area, and solemnly consult their scripts. Freda sits down at the little table, on the other side of the stage.*) Curtain! (*There is a short pause, while Barbara gazes pensively at her hands, which she holds spread to represent a large book. Gertrude utters a low moan. It is not a success.*) You'll have to keen better than that. Throw a little agony into it.

REHEARSAL

GERTRUDE (*sits up*)

Can't we have the footlights on? I can do much better then. It seems to make it more real.

FREDA

Good idea. Chris, switch 'em on.

(*Christine exit. The footlights go on, and Christine returns.*) We've got to get into the spirit of this thing. Try to imagine the audience out there. (*She waves toward the auditorium.*) Imagine the place crowded with intelligent faces—proud parents, interested friends, hopeful young men——

BARBARA

I'm damned if I want to wear trousers before a mixed audience——

FREDA

Don't be so mid-Woodrovian. Look here, I told you to bring something to use as a Bible. What did you make me director for if you're not going to obey orders? Wait a minute, I'll find something. (*She rushes off.*)

GERTRUDE

Tell me if this sounds any better. (*She utters several throbbing, tremulous wails.*)

CHRISTINE

Somehow it doesn't seem to carry conviction.

SONIA

You must try to imagine terrible things. Imagine you've flunked Physics.

ONE ACT PLAYS

GERTRUDE

The trouble is, it's so hard to find any place to practise keening. I tried it in my room late at night, and the watchman sent for a doctor.

MARJORIE

I wish Freda wouldn't insist on that moonlight.

GERTRUDE

I simply can't keen in cold blood. It'll be all right when the audience is here.

SONIA

You're too self-conscious. You'll never be a great actress.

GERTRUDE

You'd be self-conscious, too, if you had to play this part before parents and younger brothers.

CHRISTINE

Younger brothers are the devil. They're as bad as Doctor Freud.

SONIA

Write and tell them there's smallpox in town.
(*Reënter Freda, carrying large telephone directory.*)

FREDA (*to Barbara*)

Here you are—the Telephone Book. It's the only thing I could find. Come, now, places!

BARBARA (*produces a clay pipe*)

I thought that if I used this pipe, it would help me to get the illusion. (*Puts it in her mouth and sits down with the directory.*)

REHEARSAL

FREDA

Curtain!

(Barbara sits in the "wheel-chair," turning over the leaves of the directory, and awkwardly holding the pipe in her mouth. Gertrude is lying, face down, with her head buried in her arms, on the chairs at the back. She utters a dire dreadful moaning occasionally.)

BARBARA

Has Herself come yet?

GERTRUDE *(sobbing)*

Not yet. Nor never will, I'm thinking.

BARBARA *(gravely, with the tremulous voice of old age, but having great trouble to keep the pipe in her mouth while she speaks)* Fifty year and five it is that I'm living in this place, and never before now did shame come down upon the home of the O'Connell. *(Gertrude utters only a low wail.)* Be leaving off your keening, my girl, I'll be having no stomach to my supper. Is that broth cooked?

GERTRUDE *(gets up languidly and pretends to look at the hearth)* No, Father.

BARBARA

Come away out of the darkness, now, and let me be seeing you. *(Gertrude comes forward, slowly and shamefully, and crouches at Barbara's feet. Barbara tries to light her pipe.)* See how all the names are written here in the Book—names of the O'Connell, all numbered in the Good Book. *(Christine and Sonia cannot restrain a giggle.)*

ONE ACT PLAYS

Thirteen childer and never a word of shame agin one of them. Francey, Padraic, Finn, Bridget, Cathleen, Dennis. Think of Dennis, now, who killed three Englishmen in one Sunday. This has been a proud house, surely.

GERTRUDE

I'm thinking that the broth will soon be ready, Father.

BARBARA

• God be praised, I'm after keeping my appetite in spite of all this sorrow. (*Points to page in the book.*) Thirteen childer, six dead of the bog fever, three drowned in the fishing, two in jail for the republic, one gone to America—all numbered in the Book.

CHRISTINE (*to Sonia*)

Call Columbus 8200.

FREDA (*angrily*)

Shhhh!

BARBARA (*in her own voice*)

I've forgotten my lines. It isn't fair of the author to give any one a speech as long as this one.

GERTRUDE

It doesn't matter. The audience never listens to the first five minutes. They're busy climbing over each other's feet.

FREDA (*rapping on table*)

How do you expect to get this thing across if you make a joke out of it?

REHEARSAL

BARBARA

I simply can't talk with this pipe in my mouth.
It's funny—I've often seen men do it.

FREDA (*reading from her script*)

"I am an old man——"

BARBARA

Oh, yes. (*Resumes her part.*) I am an old man,
and shamed in my own house. I am after looking
for the third chapter of Isaiah. Does Isaiah
come *after* Jeremiah or before it? I never can
remember.

GERTRUDE

Yourself had thirteen childer, Father, and if
only one goes to hell, it's no bad proportion at
all——

BARBARA

Whisht, whisht, Norah—is it the Bad Place
Yourself is speaking of? Don't be naming that
place to an old stricken man that maybe will
have had sins of his own to be shriven. It's
perished with hunger I am.

GERTRUDE (*rises, goes to chairs at the back and stoops
over the imaginary fire*)

Which is it that is troubling you more, Father:
the shame or the supper?

BARBARA (*absently turning over pages of the directory*)

The third chapter of Isaiah. There's something
about mantles and wimples and crisping pins.

GERTRUDE

Crisping pins, is it? Devil a crisping pin did
I ever see in this house.

ONE ACT PLAYS

BARBARA (*reads*)

"Because the daughters of Zion walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet . . . the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments . . . the chains and the bracelets and the mufflers, the bonnets and the ornaments of the legs . . . the rings and nose jewels, the changeable suits of apparel, and the mantles and the wimples and the crisping pins. . . . And it shall come to pass that instead of sweet smell there shall be stink; and instead of well-set hair baldness; and instead of a stomacher——" Sure, Norah, isn't that broth ready?

GERTRUDE

Here it is, Father. (*Comes forward, carrying an imaginary bowl, which she sets down on an imaginary table beside Barbara, and pretends to set out imaginary dishes, spoons, etc.*)

FREDA (*interrupting*)

That's rotten! Barbara, you've got to be more tragic. Read that with more feeling.

BARBARA

I don't like reading the Old Testament. It's—well, it's so vulgar——

FREDA (*going to her*)

Let me show you how that ought to go. Remember you're a broken old man. (*Takes the directory and sits down in Barbara's chair; assumes a quavering and senile solemnity, and pretends to read from the book, improvising the speech*

REHEARSAL

from memory.) Because the daughters of Zion walk with stretched forth legs and wanton stomachs the Lord will take away John J. Wimple plumber and steamfitter and instead of crimping pins there shall be Henry Wiesenfeldt Audubon-6543. (*Rises.*) There, do you see? More pathos!

MARJORIE

Just a minute! I hadn't heard about all these mufflers and wimples and crimping pins—they aren't actual props, are they?

GERTRUDE

No, no, you poor fish. They're only mentioned.

MARJORIE

Well, how was I to know? Freda never gave me a copy of the script to look over. If anything goes wrong, it won't be my fault.

FREDA

Attention, please! Now go on with it from there. (*Barbara resumes her place in the chair.*)

BARBARA

Where were we? These interruptions get my goat.

FREDA

"Here it is, Father."

GERTRUDE

Here it is, Father. (*Again brings imaginary soup from the rear, and serves it as before. Barbara pretends to spoon it up with gusto.*) Leave off feeding till I fix your napkin. Herself might

ONE ACT PLAYS

be coming in, and you wouldn't want to be all speckled with the soup——

BARBARA

There's darker stains than spilling a little broth on your breastbone. Yourself might be thinking of the daughters of Zion.

GERTRUDE

Perhaps the daughters of Zion were not brought up all alone in the bogs, with no company but the moonlight and an old man dripping his soup. It's more of soup you are thinking than of salvation. Surely it's bitter.

BARBARA (*after a pause*)

It *is* bitter. You've maybe dropped some of the kelp in it. (*A pause.*) I'll be telling you the truth, I'm destroyed altogether with thirst. If you'd be slipping over to the shebeen to bring me a dram——

GERTRUDE (*goes to the chair that represents a window, and pretends to look out*)

Here comes Herself now, God help us, and a foreigner with her. Be easy and go on with your supper. I'll be passing into the loft. (*She starts to the chair-doorway, right, and then impulsively returns to Barbara. Piously.*) Oh, Daddy, you'll not be thinking too hard of your Norah?

BARBARA (*still eating*)

It's grand fine soup. (*Gertrude goes through chair-doorway, right, and stands near Freda. Christine and Sonia come to chair-doorway, left,*

REHEARSAL

and Sonia taps on the stage with her foot, to represent knocking at the door.) Who's that, God help us? *(Christine and Sonia enter.)* Ah, it's yourself, Mrs. O'Toole, and a foreigner with you.

CHRISTINE

Yes. An English lady, God help her.

BARBARA

Come in and be set.

CHRISTINE

Surely it's quare and cold to-night, Shawn, and the bogs in the moonshine as white as soap.

BARBARA

Yes, I've finished my soup, thank you kindly.

CHRISTINE

A sorrowful night to be lying drowned in the bogs, I'm thinking. I mind the time when Katie O'Shaughnessy perished herself in the marsh. She floated face under, God help her, and they said it was because she was ashamed to look her Maker in the face. Indeed, I don't wonder, with nothing on her but a shift.

BARBARA

The men folk float face upwards, Mrs. O'Toole.

CHRISTINE

To be sure you ought to know the rights of it, what with three sons floating in at the high tide. *(To Sonia.)* We waked them all together, and Father Daly ran short on candles.

ONE ACT PLAYS

SONIA

Mr. O'Connell, I'm afraid I have dreadful news for you——

BARBARA

Indeed, ma'am, bad news is an old friend in this house of shame. (*Plaintively.*) If I had a drop of spirits it would be a consolation.

FREDA (*interrupting*)

Fine! That's fine! (*The actors relax, and stand at ease.*) I don't think your Irish brogue is very good, but you're beginning to get the spirit of the thing.

CHRISTINE

Yes, if we can do it like this I think the audience ought to be sufficiently depressed.

FREDA

We won't need to go over the part where the young Englishman's body is brought in, and Norah commits suicide. By the way, Marjorie, what are you going to do for the young Englishman's body?

MARJORIE

Oh, I'm going to play that myself. My only chance of glory.

FREDA

All right, then—we'll take it again from the beginning down to where Sonia and Christine come in.

SONIA

I don't think that's fair. You never give me a chance to rehearse the only decent bit I have.

REHEARSAL

BARBARA

Oh, rot, Sonia! Your stuff is a cinch. You don't even have to talk Irish.

GERTRUDE

Yes, for Heaven's sake let's do that first part again while we've got it hot. If I don't get used to watching Barbara I shall burst into yells of laughter——

BARBARA

Considering I have the rottenest part in the whole show, I think I do fairly well.

SONIA

Some people are certainly hard to please. Your part is the only one with a chance for any real acting. Pretty fat, I call it.

CHRISTINE

I agree with Sonia. We ought to rehearse the last half as often as we can. That bit where I have to break the news to the old man needs some doing. That seems to me the real crux of the play, and I don't feel at all sure of it yet.

MARJORIE

I thought you were going to check up that list of props with me. Here I've been hanging around——

FREDA

Ye gods, you girls think of no one but yourselves. Can't you forget your own parts for a moment and think of the good of the show?

ONE ACT PLAYS

SONIA

I don't care, you've skimped my part right along, and never give me a decent chance to rehearse. I know damn well you want me to flivver——

BARBARA

Sonia can have my part whenever she wants it. I'm fed up with the stricken old parent and his house of shame——

GERTRUDE (*looking at her wrist watch*)

Well, what's the dope? I haven't got all day——

MARJORIE

You people make me tired. All wanting to grab off the footlight stuff. Suppose some of you lend *me* a hand in building the scenery.

FREDA (*angrily*)

Who's directing this play, I'd like to know? You put it up to me, didn't you? *Somebody's* got to run things——

CHRISTINE

It was asinine to pick out a fool play like this. Why not something with some fun in it?

FREDA

Who ever heard of a one-act play with any fun in it? They don't write 'em. A one-act play *has* to be artistic——

SONIA

All I can say is, I hate to see an innocent audience suffer.

REHEARSAL

GERTRUDE

I know I'll *never* be able to live down this house of shame business with my young brothers. They'll be kidding me about it for the next five years.

SONIA

Come on now, all together—can't we do something else instead? Honestly, Freda, we'd rehearse all night for the next week if you'll choose something really decent——

FREDA

Don't be absurd. The announcements have gone out.

SONIA

I bet the damn thing will be a hideous failure——

FREDA

Now let's be sensible. I know exactly how you all feel. Putting on a play is just like going to the dentist—the worst part is beforehand. When the fatal evening comes, no one will suspect the agony we've been through. I bet the house will give us a big hand—even the younger brothers.

BARBARA

Freda's right. Come on, children, a little courage!

FREDA

We'll do the second part of the play at the next rehearsal. This time we'd better stick to what we've been doing, and get it set. Places!

ONE ACT PLAYS

BARBARA

Give the stricken old father time to light his pipe. (*As she fumbles with the pipe, the others take their positions—Freda at the little table; Margorie at the rear; Christine and Sonia down-stage, left; Gertrude on the chairs toward the back; and Barbara then sits down with the telephone directory.*)

FREDA

Curtain!

(*And, as Barbara turns over the leaves of the book, and Gertrude utters her first "keen," the curtain falls.*)

BEDROOM SUITE

To Harold Pulsifer.

CHARACTERS

JERRY, *the Window Dresser*

ALICE, *from the Book Department*

NIGHT WATCHMAN

BEDROOM SUITE

The scene represents the show window of a department store, in which a "bedroom suite" is to be displayed for the January Sale. The author believes—he hopes not erroneously—that a department or furniture store would willingly lend (or rent) the necessary pieces for the advertisement of being thanked on the programme.

The back and sides of the display space are of wood panelling—preferably of a cheap ruddy mahogany or rosewood colour. At the rear, near the L corner, is a wide opening where one of the movable panels has been slid aside. This aperture, supposed to open into the ground floor of the store, is backed by some dark hanging.

When the curtain rises, the furniture, draperies, toilet knick-knacks, etc. (with which the window is to be "dressed") are in disarray. The furniture is probably pseudo-mahogany, or "American walnut" or else that dreadful pallid yellowish timber the stores call (I think) "satinwood." At any rate, the whole display has the girish shop-window effect. Against the L partition, a feminine dressing table, with a low stool between its two lobes. At the back, a masculine "dresser"—what used to be called a chest of drawers or bureau. Toward the R side, placed at an angle (according to the best

ONE ACT PLAYS

tenets of window-display technique), a large double bed. Against R wall, a "chiffonobe." At the head of the bed, on R side, a small stand with an electric lamp in cretonne shade. Between bed and dressing table, L side, a table with a reading lamp; at L side of this table, a chaise longue; on the floor, an "Oriental" rug of rather opulent pattern. Against the rear wall, and carefully laid out on a white sheet on the floor, are a large number of oddments—framed pictures, hair-brushes, manicure sets, book-rests, etc.

Enter through the aperture at the rear (the only door) Jerry, the store's window dresser. (He thinks of himself as "display manager.") He is in waistcoat and shirt-sleeves; breezy, dapper, quick-witted, uncultured, but extremely shrewd; a man of twenty-five or thereabouts, whose natural ambition and alert eye for theatrical effects have lifted him to this important position. He is a typical product of the department-store world, where continual contact with all the smart and luxurious things that money can buy imparts a plausible outward polish without any inwardness of genuine taste. It would be interesting to meditate upon this character, but brevity is indicated. At any rate you must understand that our friend, in spite of his mercantile smartness, has something of the enthusiastic artist in his heart. He is impassioned with his work, loves it; and whatever of cynicism or skepticism there may be in him is quite laid aside when he sets upon his practised work—dressing a window in such fashion as to impress and seduce the kind of customers catered

BEDROOM SUITE

to by that store. *His trousers are magnificently pressed; he probably wears suède-topped shoes; and has a thin gold watch-chain diagonally across his vest.*

He carries on his arm a silk kimono, a smoking-jacket, a coverlet, and some chintz draperies; and has in his hand a long memorandum list. He throws the garments, etc., on the chaise longue and picks up from the rear an enormous pair of felt slippers, which he puts on over his shoes. He walks about, checking off the articles of display on his memorandum.

JERRY

Seven-piece Jacobean (*He pronounces "bean" like the vegetable.*) Period bedroom suit [*sic*]*—* vanity dresser, bridegroom dresser, chifforobe, bed, lamp stand, boudoir table (*He pronounces boudoir just as spelled*) and shays lounge. - O. K.! (*From the rear, behind the bed, he brings two signs, which he places down close to the foot lights, one R, one L. One says:*

JANUARY SALE

the other:

SEVEN-PIECE JACOBAN BEDROOM SUITE

\$398.75

He picks up the coverlet from the chaise longue, spreads it over the bed, arranges the bolster, etc. He kneels down to straighten the rug under the bed. While he is on his knees at the bedside,

ONE ACT PLAYS

giving a final smoothing to the covers, enter Alice, carrying three or four books.

Alice (from the Book Department) need not be assumed to be literary in her tastes. She is perhaps twenty-three, has worked her way up from cash-girl, and has found life in a department store extremely amusing. She is brisk, confident, comely, ambitious, even a bit impertinent. Probably also a little touched with rebellion, natural enough in a girl who sees so many of the comfortable things of life going to women no more gifted than herself, and often not so intelligent. She is wearing street clothes, as she is ready to leave the store.)

ALICE

Well. Saying your prayers?

JERRY (*quite unabashed, without looking round*)

Yeah. Praying for a woman who might be able to use her bean.

ALICE

You got the closing-time fever, that's what it is. Here's some books for you. Sullivan sent 'em down for the window.

JERRY (*turning*)

Oh, it's you—where you been?

ALICE

Same as usual. On the job. Don't notice you comin' around much.

JERRY

Been busy. (*He goes on with his work, arranging furniture, moving swiftly about with certainty and assurance.*)

BEDROOM SUITE

ALICE

Going to lectures, I suppose.

JERRY (*tersely*)

Yep.

ALICE (*sits down on stool by dresser*)

I have to laugh when I think of the night we were goin' to take in a picture. Changed your mind and took me to a spiel on wall-paper.

JERRY

What are the books?

ALICE

I didn't look. (*Examining:*) "Society and Solitude," by Emerson; "The Life of the Insect," by Faber [*sic*]; "Tales of Mystery and" (*cautiously*) "Rat-i-o-cination," by Poe.

JERRY

Another bonehead. What's the matter with Sullivan? Why don't he send me something up to date?

ALICE

He said he picked out some swell morocco bindings.

JERRY (*ironically*)

"Life of the Insect"—that's appropriate for a bedroom suit, ain't it?

ALICE (*good-naturedly*)

Want me to get some others instead?

JERRY

Never mind. I'll put 'em so they can't see the titles. (*He is on hands and knees arranging*)

ONE ACT PLAYS

electric light cord from the bedside lamp. Alice sits again on stool.)—"Life of the Insect." That's what I lead around this dump. (*Sweeps rug with dustpan and brush.*)

ALICE

It sure is fine to see a man doing the house-work.

JERRY

I've done it to-night, all right. Four windows already. Kitchen suit, dining-room suit, bath-room, and nursery.

ALICE

Quite the family man. You'll make a good husband for some poor foundling.

JERRY (*halting work to look at her*)

Say, for a weary working wench you pull quite a line of persiflage, don't you? (*He pronounces "persiflage" to rhyme with "rage."*) I guess you'd be peeved, too, if you had this job. Miss Healy in the Decorating Department picked out the stuff for this window, and look at the junk she sent down! Look at that rug!

ALICE (*tactfully*)

I think it's going to look slick. Your windows are always lovely.

JERRY

Well, it won't be so bad when we get through with it.

ALICE (*admiring dresser*)

I think this furniture's grand.

BEDROOM SUITE

JERRY (*affectionately stroking woodwork*)

Yeh. That fellow Jacobean turns out some good stuff. (*Studies table appraisingly, and shifts it a little.*)

ALICE

You needn't think you're the only one that has to work overtime.

JERRY

Well, whyn't you go home and rest up?

ALICE (*scornfully*)

Home! The old man cooking his socks on the radiator and mother bawling him out, and the kids studying their lessons for high school - some sanitarium! The first one of us girls that gets home has to wash the supper dishes. I stay out late, so the kids can get their lessons done in the bedroom. They got to have *one* quiet room, ain't they? You keep me amused round here awhile, you'll save me the price of a movie. (*Jerry is a trifle embarrassed. He is on the point of saying that he'll blow her to a movie, but refrains, knowing that would make it appear she was hinting for such an offer: which she wasn't. He hastens about his tasks, and drapes a long strip of curtain fabric round the head of the bed and trails it forward across the floor toward the middle of the stage. Finally he speaks. By the way, you must not assume that because they speak a bit roughly to each other that they are really angry. Such is the way of their kind.*)

JERRY

Well, I suppose you think a hall bedroom in a

ONE ACT PLAYS

lodging-house is a de-looks home. A home's a place where you can have your own icebox and not have nobody butting in on you like a current-events reel. (*Admiring his drapery:*) How's that—pretty nifty?

ALICE

Slick. Gee, I sometimes wonder if folks really live like this!

JERRY

Sure they do. You get a job in the Decoratin' Department, then maybe you'll get sent on a trip tearin' this kinda stuff out of some place where they ain't paid for it. (*A brief pause while he continues to arrange furniture, etc.*)

JERRY

I always say the windows are the most important part of the whole business. That's your point of contact with the public. I like to have 'em artistic. You know what I mean: refined, kinda simple; but these birds always want me to shove in a lot of truck that don't belong. No taste, that's what it is. Look at these hand-made pastels. (*He accents this on the first syllable, and holds one up—a saccharine picture of the "September Morn" school.*) That sort of thing'd be all right on Fourteenth Street, but this window ought to be class.

ALICE

Put it over there, behind the bed. It won't show much there.

BEDROOM SUITE

JERRY (*judges the effect of the picture in the suggested position, and shoots a quick glance at her*)

Say, you got ideas, haven't you?

ALICE (*turns round to mirrors on dresser, takes off her hat, and pats her hair*)

It must be great to have one of these three-side looking-glasses. (*Adjusts the mirrors.*) I never did get a real good look at the back of my head.

JERRY

That rug, now. That ain't right with this layout. It ought to be some of those little rag carpets, kinda country-looking and homely. You don't want one of these heavy big rugs in a bedroom; it hides up your parkay floor. You can't fool me on this kinda stuff. I was brought up in Ohio, in the country, where we had that black-walnut furniture and little red-and-blue wove rugs just big enough to stand on when you got outa bed on a cold morning. My mother used to weave them rugs herself. She'd laugh if she coulda known that old walnut washstand of hers would be all the class nowadays.

ALICE (*meditatively, almost as if to herself, as she repairs her coiffure before the mirror*)

I'm glad the store wouldn't let the girls bob their hair. Lots of my friends who bobbed last year are sore about it now. It's all outa style, and it takes a terrible time to grow out again.

JERRY (*absorbed in his theories*)

I'm trying to educate this store up to the right kind of window trim. (*He is busy putting toilet*

ONE ACT PLAYS

articles on the bureau, rear.) Simplicity, that's it. You don't want to stuff your space full of all kinds of tripe. Reticence—d'you get me? I used to dress windows for Moskowitz, down on Sixth Avenue. That bird was crazy about having his windows *lifelike*. When there was a bed in the display, he wanted the blanket and sheet turned down, just like someone was going to climb into it. If it was a double bed, he had it turned down on both sides. That's not art. That's vulgar. (*He comes forward and lectures her.*) You don't want to make your windows too lifelike. This ain't one of those bedroom farces in the theayter.

ALICE

There isn't any room in this dresser to keep your clothes.

JERRY

You keep 'em over there in the chifforobe.

ALICE (*crosses to chifforobe*)

Think of having three drawers all to yourself! At our house my kid sisters got the two bottom drawers, and I got to hide my silk stockings under the mattress or they get them, too. There's no shelves like this, neither.

JERRY

That's for the husband's trousers. Maybe, if he was a sport, he'd let you have 'em.

ALICE (*examining the chifforobe*)

What—the trousers?

BEDROOM SUITE

JERRY

No; the shelves, of course. That's where you'd keep your chiffon blouses. He'd hang his pants in the wardrobe. A first-class bedroom suit ought to have a wardrobe, with a rod in it for the coat-hangers.

ALICE

If I were you, I'd change around this chifforobe and the—what do you call that thing? (*Points to bureau at rear.*)

JERRY

Jacobean calls it a bridegroom dresser——

ALICE

Well, Mrs. Jacobean wouldn't want to have to go 'way across the room from her dresser to the chifforobe.

JERRY

Say, I guess you're right. (*He starts to move the pieces.*)

ALICE

I'll give you a hand.

JERRY (*as they shift the furniture*)

Quite a little domestic scene—Mr. and Mrs. Jacobean on moving day.

ALICE

Gosh—my hair's coming down.

JERRY

Lay off, kid. I can do this. (*However, she helps him finish the job.*)

ONE ACT PLAYS

ALICE *My hair*

I'll have to fix my hair. Hope you don't mind.
(*She sits again at the dresser and begins to reorder her coiffure.*)

JERRY (*humorously*)

All the conveniences of home. (*Brings toilet articles, brush, hand-mirror, manicure set, scent bottles, silver-framed photo of Mary Pickford, etc., and lays them on dresser beside Alice.*) If you're not in a hurry, spread these out for me. I want to get the real feminine touch in this window. I've got to make a killing with this layout. They're stuck with these seven-piece suits, and they want to sell 'em off.

ALICE

I'm wondering about that shays lounge and reading-table. That's crazy stuff. People who can afford fixings like this don't sit and read in their bedrooms. The lady would have a little boodwore to loaf in.

JERRY

Oh, well, it's kinda nice and intimate. When you get back from the opera. (*Puts a silver thermos decanter and glasses on the table, and mimics an imaginary aristocrat.*) Well, my dear, I feel a trifle wakeful. I think I'll just sit here and read a little before I retire. I sha'n't disturb you, shall I? (*He jocularly slips on the smoking-jacket, throwing kimono to one side, and sits down in chaise longue, speaking to Alice over his shoulder.*) Then, while she sits in dishabille, or negligee, or whatever they call it,

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removing her Téclas, he picks up a book (*does so*) and reads a little about insects, to compose his mind. (*He leans back in chair, in the rôle of the luxurious patrician, and pretends to read book. Alice, entering into the spirit of the game, seizes the kimono, unseen by Jerry, and slips it round her. With a quick shake she lets her hair fall down, and sits at the dresser brushing it. She quite calmly takes up her part in the burlesque.*)

ALICE

Eustace, I have a confession to make. These are not the Téclas. I went to the bank to-day and got out the real pearls. I wanted Mrs. Vanderbilt to see them.

JERRY

It's quite all right, Gwendolyn, quite all right. A beautiful woman deserves beautiful fixings. Things are very bearish on the Exchange just now. I cleaned up handsomely to-day on—er—on Amalgamated Spiders.

ALICE (*addressing an imaginary maid*)

I sha'n't be needing you to-night, Estelle. I'll do my hair myself.

JERRY

You're sure I'm not intruding? (*Looks round from the chaise longue, sees rear view of her in kimono and with her hair down. He is considerably startled.*) Umm—maybe I am. (*Resumes his own manner, rises, but is embarrassed to see her so attractive in negligee.*) I don't think I like that game. I don't like the name of Eustace. (*Takes off smoking-jacket, and stands uncer-*

ONE ACT PLAYS

tainly as she goes on calmly brushing her hair.)
Cheese it, kid! Maybe the watchman——
(Alice rises, apparently oblivious of him, turns about to get a good view of herself in the rich silk gown, poses a moment, then throws the kimono quickly on the floor. She drops rather forlornly to the stool and droops over the dressing-table, burying her face in her arms.)

JERRY (*dismayed*)

Gee, what's got into the kid? (*Approaches, and awkwardly pats her shoulder.*) Say, I'm glad you didn't have it bobbed. (*Looks apprehensively toward door.*) I had no idea it was like that. (*Touches her hair with clumsy tenderness.*) Say, anything wrong?

ALICE (*sits up quietly, and begins to coil her hair*)

Just something I saw in the glass, that's all.

JERRY (*he is puzzled; he had thought she was crying*)

In the glass?

ALICE (*with a sort of bitter restraint*)

I wonder if she's happy.

JERRY

Who?

ALICE

Mrs. Jacobean. Anybody. You'd think they'd ought to be happy with all these nice things. Is anybody happy? Jerry, you work so hard to make a swell display with all this stuff, and you just kid people into thinking they're going to be happy when they got it.

BEDROOM SUITE

JERRY (*cannot understand*)

What do you mean? I don't get you.

ALICE

I don't get myself. It's crazy stuff. I don't know, I just got a kind of picture of all of us. Some poor people get this bedroom suit, and they think they're goin' to be happy——

JERRY

Poor people? Three hundred ninety-eight bucks? Poor people don't get this kind of furnishings.

ALICE (*still with suppressed bitterness*)

I don't mean poverty poor. I mean unhappy. I see them comin' in and out of the store. They buy all these swell things; but that don't make 'em feel the way they'd like to feel. Or maybe they don't pay for them, like you said, and the Decoratin' Department goes and rips it all out again. I don't know just *what* I mean; I got a kinda picture, that's all. There's some of us that ain't meant to be happy, I guess; we can't shine and sparkle like real people. Just Técla people, that's what we are.

JERRY (*comes over, with another anxious look toward the door, and tries to console without exactly knowing what to do*)

There now, kid, I know how it is, you're tired. And, say, you needn't believe I'm going to be one of the Téclas. No, *sir*, I'll string along with the real beads. I'm not going to be just a window-dresser in this dump all my life, not by a damn sight! Why, you used to ride me about

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that studying nights and going to lectures on wall-paper. Well, when I get a home of my own it's not going to be faked like this junk. Believe me, it's going to be real. (I see what you mean, sure; all this window stuff is poor class, no real taste to it. I didn't know you were that sensitive.)

ALICE

No, Jerry, you don't get me. I kinda feel it all the time, 'way down under, but I don't know how to say it. When I see you fussing round this fool window, dolling it up like it was a real place, I was thinking how we all get stung. On the level, I believe we're all just show windows: we put our bright stuff and our slick talk up in front, close to the glass; the folks don't see what we feel like behind.

JERRY

You'll feel better now you got your hair fixed. It must feel sloppy when you got it all hanging down, hey?

ALICE

A lot you know about it! Hand me my hat, Jerry. (*She puts it on. Jerry is quite baffled by the turn her mood has taken. She gets up and walks about, touching the various pieces of furniture with a kind of tenderness.*) All these things look so pretty and—I don' know, I just got thinking about who was going to buy them. I hope they'll be happy, that's all. There ain't anything wrong in wanting *someone* to be happy, is there? I'd like to leave a note in that chiffo-

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robe and have some dame find it some day when she was hunting a handkerchief to cry into, and tell her for the lovamike to keep a stiff upper lip. If I was furnishin' this house, I think I'd have the same cretonne in the dining-room. It's kinda cheerful.

JERRY (*ironically*)

Yeh. It seems to be. I see what you're getting at. You mean there ain't nothing quite so good as what it looks in the show windows. Well, sure. That's right, I guess. But there ain't no harm in making things look a bit better than actual. Gee whiz, kid, we all got to jolly ourselves along a bit once in a while or we'd quit cold. A stick o' gum don't keep its taste more'n a minute, but lots of folks keeps right on chewin'.

ALICE

I was thinking about this window when the shade goes up to-morrow morning. How nice it'll look, and all the poor simps of women looking in and wishing they had things fixed up like that. It ain't fair to fool the women—they're too easy.

JERRY

I'm not fooling 'em. This stuff is all good. It ain't just glued together. I never heard a comeback yet on that Jacobean factory.

ALICE

I'm not talking about the furniture, Jerry. I'm talking about women. It's not fair to play on their instincts that way. I'm thinking about

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Mother, all the other women. I guess they thought life was going to be as pretty as a show window. It seems as though life ought to be fine, too. I read a book once about people who were happy; they laughed and said lovely things. Gee, you don't know what it is to be a girl! Every girl thinks she's going to have a good time. Well, they get fooled.

JERRY

Sure, most everybody gets fooled sooner or later. I don't care, so long as *we* don't get fooled. (*Crosses to her.*) Do you know what I think about when I'm dressing these windows? (*A pause.*)

ALICE (*evasive*)

I guess this kind of wood shows the dust pretty bad if you don't keep it rubbed up——

JERRY

I think about you. Every time I doll up one of these windows I sort of pretend to myself it's a real apartment and *we're* going to live in it. I say to myself, This dresser's for the kid, there ain't anything too good for her; this chifforobe is the kind of thing she'll like——

ALICE (*nervously*)

Oh, gee, Jerry, I don't know, I don't know——
(*She sits on bed, troubled.*)

JERRY

Well, don't you suppose a *man* has instincts, too? Every time I have to dress up these furniture windows why, naturally, I think about getting

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married. Don't talk about June being the month of weddings. It's the January reductions in furniture that starts 'em off. (*Sits beside her, and speaks more gently.*) It wasn't till I had all these windows to do this year that I just knew who it was I wanted to put into 'em.

ALICE (*tremulously*)

If we could live in a window, I guess it'd be easy. But living with real folks is hard.

JERRY (*puts his arm round her*)

Live in a window? How do you get that way, honey? What do you think we are—wax dummies? Now listen, I been waiting to spring this on you. There's some little three-room apartments up on Haven Avenue——

ALICE (*her head on his shoulder*)

I want it, Jerry—I want it. . . . You don't think it's just this furniture—sort of getting our goat?

JERRY

They've got a suit up on the seventh floor that looks a good deal like this——

ALICE (*her spirits coming back strong*)

Like this! Oh, Jerry! With a chifforobe and all? (*She rises and looks round ecstatically.*)

JERRY

Well, there ain't no shays lounge and no reading-table; but you said yourself you didn't see the sense of having them. Any lounging and reading we needed we could get done in the living-room. I got no use for books in a bedroom.

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ALICE (*beginning to scheme*)

We'd have curtains just like this (*touching drapery*), and a chifforobe! (*Opens drawers of chifforobe again, with new sense of proprietorship.*) That shade ought to be darker, don't you think?

JERRY

There isn't any lamp-stand in the suit upstairs. It's a four-piece set. There ain't space for seven pieces in a three-room apartment.

ALICE

Bedroom, living-room. . . . We'd eat in the kitchen?

JERRY

Sure. Get the grub good and hot. In the living-room we could have one of those Davenport's that turn into a bed, and maybe if your ma or some of those kid sisters wanted to come and visit——

ALICE

Oh, Jerry! The kids could come and study their lessons in our living-room while we were out at the pictures——

JERRY (*good-humouredly*)

Sure, once in a while. But, say, I'm not going to marry a girl just to give her kid sisters a quiet place to do their school work.

ALICE

I'm so excited, I can't help my mind running ahead a ways. And listen, Jerry—(*shyly*)—Jerry, dear—what do you suppose I saw on the seventh

BEDROOM SUITE

floor the other day? They've got a living-room table up there, golden oak reduced 'way down. It's just a little bit scarred: they had it in the window pouring boiling water on it to advertise some varnish.

JERRY (*tenderly, his arm around her*)

I guess you been doping this out ahead of time.

ALICE

And a dresser like this one, Jerry? (*Goes to feminine dressing-table, L.*)

JERRY

Surest thing you know.

ALICE

We'll have the bedroom just as much like this window as we can, so as not to forget it.

JERRY

Absolutely. Just a little more privacy, that's all——

ALICE

You think we'll be happy, Jerry?

JERRY (*holds her*)

Yes—unless that watchman finds us like this. Keep an eye open into the store, kid, while I just finish off. (*She goes to opening at rear and looks off into the store while he quickly smooths down the bed, lays out kimono and smoking-jacket artfully, and puts finishing touches to the display.*)

ALICE (*from doorway*)

You know those scratches on that table won't matter. We can put a doily over them.

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JERRY (*looking hastily at the reading-table*)
Scratches?

ALICE

I mean *our* table. (*Pause.*) I'm just crazy to see this window from the outside, to get a good look at it.

JERRY (*looking over his work with satisfaction*)
Well, it's not so bad.

ALICE

It's funny to think of all the people that'll look at it from the street, and never guess what it means to us. I'd like to stand out there and tell them. D'you suppose we could find out who buys this suit, and write to them and tell them they've just got to be happy?

JERRY

Sure they'll be happy. Anybody that's got three hundred ninety-eight bucks to burn on a bedroom suit is bound to be. Put on your choker, and we'll be going. I'll blow you to a stack of wheats and then take you home. I guess those kids will have finished their lessons by now. (*Alice slips on her fur neckpiece and takes a last look at herself in the dressing-table mirror. Jerry comes behind her and bends down to look into the glass also.*)

JERRY

Who is it you see this time? Mrs. Jacobean again?

ALICE

I won't tell you what I see.

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JERRY

I'll go down and get my coat. Meet you at the door. (*He takes off the large carpet slippers.*)
You warm enough without any overcoat?

ALICE

I won't be cold.

(*Enter Watchman, an elderly humorous creature plainly dressed, with a derby hat.*)

WATCHMAN

Well, ain't you through yet?

JERRY

Just quitting, Jim.

WATCHMAN

Going to put the shades up on these windows to-night?

JERRY (*looks at his watch*)

Guess not. Leave 'em till the morning. (*Exit.*)

WATCHMAN

You working in the display now?

ALICE

Just helping a little.

WATCHMAN (*looking at the window*)

He's clever, ain't he? This looks good enough to live in. A layout like this makes 'em want to rush off and set up housekeeping. (*Alice lingers, affectionately touching the furniture here and there.*)

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WATCHMAN

When I see a window as pretty as this, I wonder why I didn't never get married.

ALICE

I'm afraid you're sentimental, Jim.

WATCHMAN

I guess I am. But I couldn't never find any one feeling soft the same time I did. Look the way he's got that piece of curtain laid out. Pretty smart.

ALICE (*comes up behind him*)

Jim, you're an old darling. (*She gives him a kiss hastily and exits.*)

WATCHMAN (*puzzled*)

What's the idea? Well, they're all the same. Furniture sets 'em crazy.

(*As he moves toward the rear opening, shaking his head, the curtain falls.*)

ON THE SHELF

To H. F. M.

CHARACTERS

LOVE POEMS, *the Author's first book*

THE MARQUIS

THE WIDOW

1ST VIRGIN

2ND VIRGIN

BOOZOM

THE NEW ONE

SMITH, *the Author*

} *Characters in the Author's
novels.*

ON THE SHELF

The scene is on a shelf at a public library. When the curtain rises the audience sees a small section of this shelf enormously magnified: the books stand about ten feet high and three feet wide. The backs of eight volumes are visible: they should give the appearance of that dingy brown leather in which library volumes are rebound after seeing considerable service. On the back of each book the title and author's name are lettered in gilt: these inscriptions should be very large, so that the audience can read them easily. The volumes stand erect, tightly side by side, except that at one place there is a gap—evidently one of the books is "out."

Projecting in front of the row of book-backs is a brown platform which represents the edge of the book-shelf. This must be raised a couple of feet above the floor of the stage proper, so that the characters may sit there.

In each of the book-backs, not noticeable by the audience until used, is built a small door (opening inward, so that no knob is necessary on the outside of the book) by which the characters may emerge from the volumes they inhabit. The titles of the volumes read thus from Right to Left: "In So Many Words," "My Bosom's Lord," "Solitude," "Put Asunder," "Self Made Widow," "The Trap," "Foolish Virgins," "Marquis of

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Carabas." On each book the author's name is written as SMITH.

When the scene is discovered there is a brief pause to allow the audience to apprehend the setting; then enters, through the gap in the line of books, Love Poems. She is a slender, dark-haired girl of nineteen or thereabouts, dressed in a simple summer muslin. She should have a rather old-fashioned air, for she is supposed to represent the fashion of 1899. She seems agitated, looks along the line of books as though measuring the space with her eye; tries to push some of the huge volumes closer together to make more room in the gap, cannot budge them, and stamps her foot with a gesture of half-angry despair.

LOVE POEMS

Oh, dear! It does seem too bad. (*Enter, through the door in the volume marked "Marquis of Carabas," the Marquis himself. It is a polished but rather conceited figure, attired in the court dress of pre-revolutionary France; the typical French nobleman of the costume novel. He makes her a distinguished bow.*)

MARQUIS

Bonjour, Mamselle.—Does anything fail you?

L. P.

Of course, I'm used to being pushed away in the corner; but since the New One came I'm shoved out of sight altogether.

MARQUIS (*looks along the line*)

Dear me! Why, so you are. I hadn't noticed. Couldn't you get in there? (*Points to gap.*)

ON THE SHELF

L. P.

But if the New One comes in there won't be any room.

MARQUIS

He won't be in. He's one of the Six.

L. P. (*a little bitterly*)

I suppose so. Is he nice?

MARQUIS

Oh, he's all right of his kind. (*With self-esteem:*) Of course when *I* was published manners were different.—You mustn't be disrespectful to the Best Sellers, my dear. I was one myself, in my day. (*Takes snuff, with an air.*)

L. P.

You darling!—Yes, Marquis, I know; but it's hard to be the only poetry in the works of a successful novelist.

MARQUIS (*obviously thinking more about himself than about her troubles*)

Well, my child, you *would* slip away from your own place on the Poetry shelves. Naturally, here among the popular fiction, there isn't much room——

L. P.

I was so lonely there. I had to come. *You* understand, Marquis, even if the rest don't. I wanted to be near the others who had known *Him*, even if they weren't exactly my kind.—It's hard to explain . . . but you see I was his first——

ONE ACT PLAYS

MARQUIS (*a trifle impatiently*)

Yes, yes, Mamselle. But it's a little awkward
—especially to-day—— (*He checks himself.*)

L. P.

You really think I could squeeze in here without
being pushed back right away? Oh, it's so
long since any one took me out——

MARQUIS

I'm sure of it.

L. P.

Then I *will*! (*He watches her with a sort of
pitying affection as she runs back into the darkness
behind the gap. Then he taps gently with his
cane at the door in the volume marked "Self Made
Widow." A lady in stylish mourning of very
modern mode, rather emphatically made up and
excessively soignée, appears from the book.*)

WIDOW (*breezily*)

Hullo, Mark! What's up?

MARQUIS

Madam, your adorer. (*He kisses her hand.*)
Have you heard the news?

WIDOW

Don't tell me you're going into the movies?
My dear old thing, that costume stuff is abso-
lutely out.

MARQUIS (*gravely*)

The Author is dead.

WIDOW

My God! Smith?—(*Looks at her costume.*)
Well, anyway, I won't have to buy mourning.

ON THE SHELF

MARQUIS

We're going to be tremendously busy. There's to be a Memorial Edition, with new illustrations. You ought to see what the newspapers say. "The greatest popular romancer of his time." "Creator of enduring types of human frailty"——

WIDOW

New illustrations? Well, I hope they get a better artist this time. That other fellow never did me justice——

MARQUIS

And I'm going to be translated into French. Think of it, a chance to see Paris at last!—— I always believed, you know, that I was one of his favourites——

WIDOW

Does Love Poems know? Poor kid, this'll hit her hard. You know she still takes Smith seriously——

MARQUIS

I didn't have the heart to tell her.—Besides, she won't get into the new edition. It's just the novels.

(Enter, from the volume marked "Foolish Virgins," two typical young flappers. One of them is smoking a cigarette.)

1ST VIRGIN

Hullo, Marky! Morning, Widow. What's all this about Smith croaking?

ONE ACT PLAYS

MARQUIS (*with distaste*)

You should know by this time, Mamselle, *c'est défendu de fumer* on the shelves.

2ND VIRGIN

If you ever *do* get to Paris, Marky, you'll have a nasty time with that French of yours. Poor old Smitty, his French was a scream.

WIDOW (*to the girls*)

Don't tease him; this is serious. (*1st Virgin extinguishes her cigarette.*)

MARQUIS

Yes, *mes enfants*, our creator is dead. It is a Serious Loss to Literature.

1ST VIRGIN

Good thing, too. He left *us* high and dry: bobbed hair, short skirts, rolled hose, gin flasks, all that tripe; and now look at us. We're absolutely *dated*.

2ND VIRGIN

And the pleated skirts they're wearing in the new novels are simply corking.

WIDOW

Never mind. We're going into an Edition de Luxe.

1ST VIRGIN

What ho! We'll get some decent quarters at last.

MARQUIS

I want to get a new snuffbox before we go to press.—*Ma chérie*, may I escort you anywhere?

ON THE SHELF

WIDOW

Well, Mark, if you're going toward the Avenue I need some stockings myself.

(Marquis and Widow exeunt, L.)

1ST VIRGIN

Let's drag out old Boozom and kid him along. *(They run over to volume "My Bosom's Lord" and hammer on the door. It opens and there enters a Manly Man of the Richard Harding Davis era, in Virile War Correspondent garb: flaring riding breeches, polo shirt open at the collar, silk handkerchief knotted round throat, pith helmet, boots and spurs, revolver holster, field glasses slung over shoulder, very evident notebook and pencil.)*

2ND VIRGIN

Hullo, Boozom! How's the old Best Seller?

BOOZOM

I say, what's all the tumult? Have the Japs crossed the Yalu?

1ST VIRGIN

Worse, much worse.—Smith's dead.

BOOZOM *(takes his helmet off)*

He was a brave man.—By Jove, I must get this news off to the old sheet at once. Where's the nearest cable office?

(Virgins cackle with enjoyment.)

2ND VIRGIN

Boozom, you're priceless. I'll bet they fell for you hard in 1905.

ONE ACT PLAYS

1ST VIRGIN

This way to the cable. You can blow us to a haircut for the new edition. (*They drag Boozom off, R.*)

(There is a scuffling sound, and Love Poems reappears in the gap, dragging her book. It is much smaller and thinner than the others—perhaps seven feet high and two feet wide: mounted on small casters so that she can move it. Instead of the brown library binding it is coloured a dainty white and gold, with scrolls and gilt flower-designs on the cover. It is lettered "Love Poems—Smith," and at the bottom of the back-piece the date 1899. She is, with difficulty, pulling it into the opening, when the New One enters L. He is a well-dressed man of thirty, with an air of breeding and comfortable circumstances, but betrays a rather cynical assurance and self-certainty. He hastens to her assistance.)

NEW ONE

Let me give you a hand. (*Pulls the book forward into line.*)

LOVE POEMS

Thank you ever so much.—There: someone ought to be able to see me, if I don't get pushed back again. (*She darts inside the little volume, and reappears with a feather duster, with which she begins to dust the back of the book.*)

NEW ONE (*looking around*)

Where are all the rest of them?

ON THE SHELF

L. P.

Oh, you see there aren't ever more than a few on the shelf at once. The Smiths are so popular. That is, most of them are.

NEW ONE (*looking at her intently*)

Please don't think me rude; but have we ever met before?

L. P. (*shyly*)

I—I don't think so. You see, I don't go out very much.

NEW ONE

But I believe we have. . . . I didn't exactly *meet* you, but I saw you. I remember where—In the mind of the Author.

L. P.

What do you mean?— Good heavens!—Are you the New One? (*He bows.*) And I've been pushing myself into your place—

NEW ONE

Please don't give it a thought. I'm going to be terribly busy, I sha'n't be here at all. I just stopped in to look around.

L. P. (*in a low voice*)

And he still thinks of me?

NEW ONE

He *did*.

L. P.

Did?

ONE ACT PLAYS

NEW ONE

Haven't you heard? He's dead. He died this morning.

L. P. (*slowly as though dazed*)

Dead . . . (*Lets her duster fall and comes forward blankly.*) Oh, how cruel. And he never wrote it. (*She sits down on the edge of the shelf and buries her face in her hands.*)

NEW ONE

Look here, you mustn't be so upset. Think what a success he had. There's going to be a Limited Edition, too.

L.P. (*vehemently and furiously*)

Oh, *don't* talk like that, I can't bear it. It is cruel. He never wrote the great book he used to dream about.

NEW ONE

Oh, I don't know. He did pretty well. Have you read—hem—have you read *me*?

L. P. (*with sudden hopefulness*)

Yes, perhaps I'm unfair. Tell me about the New One. And tell me about *Him*. How was he when you were there?

NEW ONE

He seemed all right. Of course, I wasn't there very long. But Miss Edwards said she had never seen him more productive.

L. P.

Productive . . . that's a queer word.—Who's Miss Edwards?

ON THE SHELF

NEW ONE

His secretary. He used to dictate to her.

L. P.

He didn't dictate when I knew him. You can't dictate poetry. Well, tell me about the story. Are you happy?

NEW ONE

Happy? My dear child, it's a *modern* novel.

L. P.

Married?

NEW ONE

Well, yes, part of the time.

L. P.

Any children?

NEW ONE

Really, that seems very irrelevant.

L. P.

What's your wife like?

NEW ONE

Why, she's rather stunning; but I don't see her again after the Fourth Chapter. You see we're not exactly congenial——

L. P.

I'm afraid you're not what he used to dream about. He talked of writing a book—oh, a *big* book, a book that would be generous and brave and understanding—a book that people would be glad to live in. Just look how he's botched it. (*Gestures to the books behind them.*)

ONE ACT PLAYS

All these poor creatures, they aren't real at all. They're only unhappy caricatures, all pining to get out of their books because they don't feel genuine. They all imagine, poor dears, that if they were in one of the other books they'd be so much more comfortable. Look at the poor silly old Marquis, in that big book full of people and yet so lonely: lonely because he doesn't know what's the matter with him. And the Widow, locked up with that awful ex-husband of hers, eating her heart out to be in the same story with the Marquis. And all the rest of them, poor puppets. It wasn't fair. The Author took advantage of their helplessness.—Perhaps I'm in the wrong book myself. Perhaps I should have been written by someone else. Oh, why did he do it?

NEW ONE

I'm awfully sorry: you'll have to excuse me. They're waiting for me at the Circulation Desk—It's been a great pleasure, I'm sure . . .

(He bows himself out, L. During Love Poems' last speech a shy-looking little man of fifty, with spectacles, smoking a pipe, rather carelessly dressed in norfolk jacket and cap, has wandered quietly in, R. This is Smith, the Author. He is strolling along the line of books, with somewhat the air of one on a holiday. He quietly pushes open the doors in the book-backs and peeps inside, then closes them softly. He has reached the "Love Poems" volumes before she notices him. He stands gazing absorbedly at it, puts out his hand as though to open the door, and then hesitates.

ON THE SHELF

Love Poems, seeing him, rises and hurries to pick up her duster.)

L. P. I'm afraid it's a little dusty. I was just cleaning up.—Were you looking for anything special?

SMITH (*politely pocketing his pipe and removing his cap; he looks at her sharply*)

I was looking for a good book.

L. P.

What do you mean by a good book?

SMITH

Well . . . an honest book. A . . . a comfortable kind of book. I'll tell you the truth. I've got a long holiday, and I want a book to live in.

L. P. (*thoughtfully*)

I hope you'll choose the right one. You see, once they put you into a book you can't get out of it. You just have to make the best of it.

SMITH

I want to find one where there'll be congenial company. Tell me about this man Smith. Are the books really worth while?

L. P.

They've been very popular. But it isn't fair to ask *me*. I'm one of his people, you see, so I'm prejudiced.

SMITH

Which story are you in?

ONE ACT PLAYS

L. P.

I'm not a story at all. I'm poetry. I don't really count, I guess. I'm Out of Print. Most of his readers don't even know I exist.—I'd rather not talk about it, please. He died this morning, and I've only just heard. (*She dusts, to conceal her feelings.*)

SMITH (*after a pause*)

It's rather odd, your being here among the Fiction.

L. P.

It isn't odd at all. I guess you don't know much about libraries. Why the shelves are just swarming with characters trying to get into the books where they feel they belong. Sometimes it's very embarrassing for the librarians. Becky Sharp, for instance—did you know she fell in love with the Master of Ballantrae? The other evening they found her on the Stevenson shelf, in negligee. They had a terrible time hushing it up. She absolutely refused to leave the book. It was a scandal.

SMITH

I don't blame Becky. I'd like to live in that book myself.

L. P.

If Authors knew the heartburnings of people who are put into the wrong books, they'd be more careful.—Are you a character from a story?

SMITH

I'm a character from a story that never got written.

ON THE SHELF

L. P.

Really? How thrilling! Do tell me about it.
(*They sit on the edge of the shelf.*) Oh, if Smith had only written the book he always intended to write!

SMITH

You seem to know a lot about Smith.

L. P.

Why shouldn't I?—Do you know why I ran away from the Poetry shelf where I was lonely and forgotten? I wanted to be near these others whom He had created: to see if they were the beautiful living creatures he used to dream of.

SMITH

And were they?

L. P.

No. They were poor images, phantoms, dolls dressed up in the passing fashion of the day. I was lonelier than ever, for I couldn't hear in them even an echo of Him.

SMITH

Perhaps he intended them to be that way. We all have to be ourselves, you know. We can't just be echoes of the Author.—Perhaps being an Author is harder than you think.

L. P. (*thoughtfully and slowly*)

Perhaps it is.—Perhaps it is. Yes, it isn't fair. The Author has us at His mercy. He makes all the rules. We can't help ourselves.—You didn't tell me about the story you come from.

ONE ACT PLAYS

SMITH

It's a story about a poet.

L. P. (*eagerly*)

The nicest kind of story!

SMITH

But he only wrote one book of poems, long ago.
Then he wrote other things, novels, which were
so successful he never went back to poetry.

L. P.

That was cowardly.

SMITH

Not necessarily. That little book of poems
was a secret between him and the girl he wrote it
for—the girl he put into the book.

L. P.

But wasn't she lonely, if he never went back to
her?

SMITH

Secrets are always lonely. If a lot of people
know about them, they're no longer secrets.

L. P.

How does the story go on?

SMITH

He put her into a book, and there she stayed:
always young, always lovely, always unspoiled,
just as she was when he first knew her.—Did
you ever think, that is the only way a woman
can keep young, by having a poet fall in love
with her?

ON THE SHELF

L. P.

There aren't enough poets to go round.

SMITH

Oh, yes, there are, if each one falls in love with enough women.

L. P.

You're being cynical.—But what good does it do her if she stays young all alone? If he goes away and she never sees him again?

SMITH

Let me finish. The poet invented pet names for her. He used to call her The Dark Lady of the Sonnets——

L. P. (*fiercely*)

Don't tell me any more. You're tormenting me. Some of those odious people have been telling you about me. They all make fun of me and pretend to be sorry for me. Oh, I believe I'm *glad* He's dead. I wouldn't want to see Him again. He went away and became Famous. I hate famous people. They belong to everybody. I wanted the boy, the boy who belonged only to me.

SMITH

My dear . . . my everlasting dear . . .
here he is.

(She gazes at him, aghast; and then realizes it is indeed He. He puts his arm around her, and with a little sigh of contentment she silently puts her head down against his shoulder. Then, with a sudden revulsion she starts away and rises to her feet.)

ONE ACT PLAYS

L. P.

But this is impossible. You're dead.

SMITH (*slowly and tenderly*)

My dear, when an author dies they punish him by making him go to live in one of his own books.—But they let him choose the one he likes best.

L. P.

Oh, you must choose one of the novels. The Limited Edition is going to be wonderful, and you'll be more comfortable there. The old Marquis, for instance: he's such a darling, and very amusing company——

SMITH

The Marquis? Pooh! I stole him straight from Dumas. No, my dear, there was another Limited Edition—very limited! How many copies was it? Five hundred?

L. P.

Only three hundred.

SMITH

That poet was only a boy, you know; and it wasn't great poetry. But perhaps I'm glad it wasn't, because no one remembers it now but us. How did that one go? (*He recites from memory:*)

All lovely things conspire to greet
My lady: daisies at her feet
Sprang white, and wistfully implored
Her plucking; and with one accord
The sunsets for her smiles compete.

The stars . . . the stars . . .

ON THE SHELF

(*He pauses, trying to remember.*) Damn, I've forgotten it!

L. P.

I know it. Haven't I lived with it all these years?

The stars in many a silver fleet
Cruise through the dark, in hopes to meet
Her eyes, that graciously reward
All lovely things . . .

SMITH (*eagerly*)

Yes! I remember now—

All gay and gentle thoughts entreat
Her favour and approval sweet:
She finishes, and makes complete
All lovely things.

(*Reflectively.*) Hmm. Rather juvenile! I believe I could do better now.

L. P.

But my dear one—you can't afford to settle down for ever in my poor little book. You're a Great Man now, and worse still, you're dead. You've got to be careful of your reputation. You belong in one of the novels, with the new introductions by critics.

SMITH

I'd forgotten. I was just thinking what fun we'd have rewriting those poems.

L. P.

You sha'n't touch a word of them.

SMITH (*Looking at the line of books, a little wistfully*)

It would be fun to rewrite them all. I didn't realize before what it means to be dead. (*He*

ONE ACT PLAYS

takes her hand.) Come, my dear. I know where I want to live. (He leads her to the door of the "Love Poems" volume, and holds it open for her. But just as she is about to enter she turns and looks offstage.)

L. P.

Wait a moment! Here come the Marquis and the Widow. They'll want to pay their respects to you.

SMITH

Quick, let's get away before they see us!

(She gives him a hasty kiss, and slips inside the book. He pauses just a moment on the threshold, gives a last look round, and then follows her in.)

(Enter Marquis and Widow, L. Both carry parcels, and are in high spirits.)

MARQUIS

En bien, ma chérie, now we are all equipped for our new prosperity.

WIDOW

And Mark, you old rascal, you never told me that you are going to be Volume One in the De Luxe Edition.

MARQUIS

Enchanting child, I was always a special favourite of the Author's. I remember his saying that he prided himself particularly on me.

WIDOW

And we shall be next door to each other; for I'm going to be Volume Two.

ON THE SHELF

MARQUIS

Ah, *bien adorée*, destiny is sometimes kind to those who have a gallant disposition. It will be strange indeed if there is not some opportunity — (*He sees the feather duster which Love Poems has dropped just outside her volume.*) Ah, *pauvre petite*, she has been trying to brighten up her little book. She is so hoping to be included in the new edition. It is rather pathetic, *n'est-ce pas?*

WIDOW

Poor kid. Don't tell her about Smith passing out, Mark. She'll find it out soon enough when they put her back in the Poetry section. By the way, that's good news about the artist.

MARQUIS

My dear, no matter how great he is, he will do us no more than justice. The last thing the Author said was that if anything happened to Him, he wanted *us* to be properly treated.

(*He leads her gallantly to the door of her volume, and waves the feather duster at her with a graceful gesture as the curtain falls.*)

WALT

A One Act Portrait

To B. Underhill.

CHARACTERS

MRS. DAVIS

DR. OSLER

HORACE TRAUBEL

LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH

AN OYSTER MAN

RICHARD HARDING DAVIS

WALT

WALT

The scene is the sitting-room of a little two-story frame cottage on Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey. It is a November afternoon; and though there is no intention of being chronologically exact, the year may be imagined as 1888.

The room is small. The stage is set skew, the back wall running at an angle so that the L corner of the room is quite far downstage. In the back wall are two windows, each divided by strips into twelve rectangular panes. Against the windows are cheap lace curtains; one on the L is tucked up over a picture, to afford a sitter in the near-by armchair an unimpeded view of the street outside. Beneath the L windowsill is a plain wooden shelf on which are a bottle of ink, some pens, a shabby spectacle case, a paste pot, large shears, and scraps of paper and letters. Between the two windows a small table is thickly piled with books, magazines, letters, a basket of grapes, newspapers, bits of string, photographs, etc. Close to the L window is a great heavily built cane-seated chair, "timbered as by some stout ship's spars," Walt described it, over its back "a great wide wolf-skin of hairy black and silver, spread to guard against cold and draught." Under the table is a large peach basket crammed with papers and books, surmounted by stout old-fashioned volumes of Shakespeare, Walter Scott's poems, and a Bible.

ONE ACT PLAYS

Near the R window is an ugly old velvet rocking chair containing a cushion, a much-used Worcester's Dictionary, a broad-brimmed well-worn Stetson hat, a gray woollen sock, a shoe-blackening brush, and the little volume of Epictetus that Walt was so fond of.

Left, below the armchair, is a wood-burning stove with a pipe that goes into the wall below a mantel-piece. On top of the stove is a pan of water, to moisten the air of the room. The mantel, hung with a scalloped festoon of velvet or felt, is crowded with large sea-shells, candlesticks, a stuffed parrot, a jar of autumn leaves, a pot of chrysanthemums, photographs of Bryant, Emerson, Tennyson, John Burroughs, and several of Walt himself. There is a small china vase of folded paper "spills," to save matches.

On the R wall is a large picture of Lincoln, a ship model on a bracket, and an old Civil War haversack hanging from a nail.

Upstage in the R wall is the only door. Below it, a sagging sofa, also piled with books, packages of old letters tied up with string, scrapbooks, and a blue knitted afghan. The whole room is in extreme disorder; the floor (covered with a much worn old carpet) is strewn with books, papers, fragments of MS., printers' proofs, maps, photographs, etc. Behind the stove is a large laundry basket also full of papers and books, and just below the stove, near the footlights, an old trunk with the lid open, and a plain chair that has lost its back.

WALT

Near the sofa, R, is a large table with a red check cloth, on which is a kerosene lamp. There are one or two plain chairs by the table. On these also are books and papers.

But when the curtain rises, all these details cannot at first be observed, for the room is in twilight with a blue dusk glimmering through the windows. Mrs. Davis enters with some pieces of wood in her apron, and puts them into the stove, which is burning brightly. She lights the lamp with a paper spill kindled at the stove; the stage lights come on at the same time, so that the room is brightly lit. She hastily makes an ineffectual attempt to straighten the muddle—arranges the window curtain, shifts the armchair, puts the cork in the ink bottle, folds the afghan on the sofa, dusts furniture with her apron, takes the hat, sock and shoebrush from the rocker. She looks wistfully at the litter of papers on the floor, and begins to pick them up; then timidly hesitates and puts them carefully back just as they were. She is a comely woman of fifty, distinctly of the busy housewife type; naturally cheerful in temper but with a faintly harassed and anxious air. She is neatly dressed in black with a large print apron.

Enter Dr. Osler—a small, dark, slender man of thirty-nine, with a black moustache. I imagine him as wearing a frock coat. He is a man of unusual personal charm, serene, sensible, and encouraging; a man still very young in spirit but already risen to great reputation, which lends a gravity and certainty to his manner. Behind this, however, is a very delightful twinkle of

ONE ACT PLAYS

irreverent humour. He carries his little bag, and puts on his gloves as he talks.

OSLER

Well, Mrs. Davis, I think the old man's better.

MRS. DAVIS

He seems awfully feeble, doctor——

OSLER

Naturally. About half his machinery isn't working at all. But I think he's good for several months—maybe years.

MRS. DAVIS

He frightens me, the things he says. I was turning him over in bed, you know it's not easy, he's so heavy. I said, "you seem to kind of slip away from me," and he says, "Yes, Mary, some day I'll slip away from you altogether."

OSLER

Now you mustn't worry. He's the kind that never does anything in a hurry.—Try to keep him easy in his mind. Not too much excitement.

MRS. DAVIS

He *would* come down this morning, digging in that trunk for some old papers, then he had a sort of attack.

OSLER

He'd better stay in bed this evening.

MRS. DAVIS

It's hard to keep him quiet, doctor, so many callers. That Mr. Traubel's here every night,

WALT

they talk till all hours—goodness knows what it's all about——

OSLER

It won't hurt him if he doesn't stay up too late. Does him good to talk. Traubel won't overstrain his mind——

MRS. DAVIS

And reporters, literary folks, people for autographs——

OSLER

Well, he mustn't overdo it. (*Looks at her keenly.*) Don't *you* overdo it, either. I guess he's not easy to look after——

MRS. DAVIS (*who sees in Osler a comprehending spirit to whom she can unburden*)

Oh, doctor, I wouldn't mind *anything* if I could just clean up a bit! But he gets in such a state if I touch his papers—— (*She breaks off, fearing she has been disloyal.*) How about his food?

OSLER

Light diet. A glass of port wine if he feels like it.

MRS. DAVIS

He seems to hanker for oysters: is that all right?

OSLER

Perfectly. Stewed, not fried. (*As he turns to go, he sees a pile of dark red books on the sofa.*) Is this the new book?

ONE ACT PLAYS

MRS. DAVIS

Yes, doctor—just in from McKay.

OSLER (*taking up a copy*)

“November Boughs” . . . (*He says this title in a way that shows he finds it significant.*)

I’d like to have a copy. Do you think I might buy one?

MRS. DAVIS

Goodness, he’d ought to give you one, all you’ve done for him. He’ll put his name in it for you——

OSLER

Yes, I’d like to have it signed——

MRS. DAVIS

I’ll run right up and ask him——

OSLER

No, not by him, he’s pestered too much already. By you.

MRS. DAVIS

Me!

OSLER

Yes. Just a notion of mine——

MRS. DAVIS

But doctor, I couldn’t——

OSLER

Yes, you could. Just take the pen and write your name. (*He picks his way gracefully across the paper-strewn floor, and gets pen and ink from the shelf by the window.*)

WALT

MRS. DAVIS (*appalled*)

But doctor, his pen, his book, he's a great man,
I'm only——

OSLER

Yes, he *is* a great man; perhaps greater than we guess. But who's kept him alive, slaved for him, cooked his meals, paid his bills, with no reason for doing it but her own kind heart?—I'm not blind, Mrs. Davis. Great men are rare, but so are great women. (*She gazes agitated at the pen he has placed in her hand; but Osler has a way of getting what he wants, and she obeys him. While she signs her name he quietly lays a five-dollar bill on the mantel, unobserved.*)

MRS. DAVIS

I'm so nervous I can't hardly write——

OSLER (*taking the book*)

Thank you. I'll call again in a day or so.
Don't let him catch cold.

MRS. DAVIS

About his supper, I thought some beef broth and
a cup custard——

OSLER

Excellent. (*As he opens the door to leave there is the jangle of an old-fashioned wire-pull doorbell, offstage.*)

MRS. DAVIS

I expect that's Mr. Traubel now——

OSLER

I'll let him in. (*Exit.*)

ONE ACT PLAYS

(Mrs. Davis picks up the things she had laid down while signing the book, looks again at the stove, the lamp, etc. The door opens and Horace Traubel and Logan Pearsall Smith enter. Traubel is a man of thirty with a rather engaging enthusiasm and suppressed excitement. We see him here at the interesting period when his eager, affectionate, simple-minded soul was wholeheartedly devoting itself to Whitman discipleship. I believe that at that time he worked in a Philadelphia bank during the day, and worshipped Walt in the evenings. A delightful paradox! He probably shows a trace of Walt's influence in his rumpled blond hair, soft hat (like Walt's but on a smaller scale), bright red bow tie with long trailing ends, and soft collar.

Young Smith, aged about twenty-three, is more conventional: he is of a well-known family of Quaker intellectuals and has studied at Haverford and Harvard: a tall thin youth with high colour and a beaky nose, very shy and sensitive but sharply alert. He wears the abbreviated side whiskers of the period and carries a round bowler hat.

Traubel, with an impressive gesture, indicates that this is the shrine of the prophet. Young Smith, a little troubled because Traubel (absorbed in the happiness of bringing in a new devotee) does not seem to notice Mrs. Davis, makes an embarrassed bob in her direction, then lets his eyes follow Traubel's pointing hand.

TRAUBEL

That's the chair.—Be careful where you walk, all these are precious.—That's the old knap-

WALT

sack he used to take things to the soldiers, in the War.—Mrs. Davis, this is Logan Smith, son of Walt's old friend Mr. Smith in Germantown. (*Smith makes a shy obeisance.*) Doctor Osler says he's a little better?

MRS. DAVIS

He says he'd ought to keep as quiet as possible. He was down this morning, cleaning up his papers, but while he was burning some of 'em——

TRAUBEL (*dismayed.*)

Burned some of his papers?

MRS. DAVIS

He had a kind of a swoond, and I got him to bed. (*A loud wailing yell is heard distantly, off: "O-o-oy! Nice fresh o-o-o-oy!"*)—Oh, there's the oyster man. I think he'd like some to his supper. (*She hurries to window, L, opens it, and calls outside:*) Oyster man! Oyster man!

TRAUBEL (*to Smith*)

Walt loves oysters. He's rather like one himself, if you try to get him to talk about what he don't want to. (*Another cry, louder, offstage: "O-o-oy! Fresh Absecon o-o-o-oy!" This is followed by a loud rapping overhead, such as might be made by a stout cane on the floor of the room above.*)

MRS. DAVIS (*anxiously*)

That's Mr. Whitman. He wants something. (*Irresolutely, looking out of the window:*) I wish the oyster man would hurry! (*Another rapping overhead.*) I'll have to go.—Mr. Traubel, ask

ONE ACT PLAYS

the man to leave a dozen nice ones when he goes by. (*She exits hastily.*)

TRAUBEL (*still exhibiting the sights*)

Walt must have had what he calls a house-cleaning day. Gosh, I hope he didn't burn anything important. (*Pointing to photos on the mantel:*) That's the picture of him I like best, the one with the butterfly on his finger. It seems symbolic, somehow.—There they all are—Tennyson, Burroughs, Longfellow, Emerson, Bryant, Whittier——

SMITH

They run rather to beards.

TRAUBEL

Yes. Some newspaper man in New York said, "If hair is poetry, Walt Whitman must be a genius."—Shows you how flip people are about a great man in his own time.

SMITH

I remember once when Walt was staying at our house, my father was jollyng him about his beard. Asked him if he grew it to look like a prophet. "No," says Walt; "I was just too plumb lazy to shave."

TRAUBEL (*a little nettled at what he regards as irreverence*)

It was a great privilege to have Walt in your home.

SMITH

Embarrassing kind of guest, though. He used to lock himself in the bathroom, after breakfast,

WALT

and sing hymns. Rather awkward, everyone wanting to get in—— (*The oyster man utters his incantation, very loudly, just outside. Traubel hastens to the window, which Mrs. Davis has left open.*)

TRAUBEL

Hi! A dozen nice oysters for Mr. Whitman, please. (*Coming away from window:*) We'll go upstairs and see him in a moment. If he says anything really important to-night, you keep him going while I slip into the hallway and make a note of it. (*Shows a notebook.*) I keep pretty careful memoranda of——

(*The oyster man's head appears at the window.*)

OYSTER MAN

Did you holler?

TRAUBEL

Yes, a dozen nice fat ones for Mr. Whitman.

OYSTER MAN (*loudly*)

A dozen nice fat nothing! You tell the old boy not another oyster till I get some money. My God, I been leaving oysters here since Labour Day and ain't seen a penny. Same thing *last* winter, too.

TRAUBEL (*scandalized*)

But Mrs. Davis usually——

OYSTER MAN

Nix, nix! Mis' Davis pays everything she can. Tell old Santa Claus to reach down in his pants and shoot me some tin.

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TRAUBEL (*indignant*)

You ought to—why, you ought to be *proud* of having him eat your oysters. You ought to put it on your cart as an advertisement, Walt Whitman, the Great Poet, Eats My Oysters.

OYSTER MAN

Yes, and don't pay for 'em. Come off your perch. I ain't a poet, but I gotta live, see?

TRAUBEL (*to Smith, in despair*)

And this is what they call civilization. The greatest poet of his age, allowed to perish for the lack of an oyster. (*To the man:*) He's ill, maybe dying, don't be a fool, you'll get your money . . . how much is it?

OYSTER MAN

Twenty dollars. You can pay me something on account—— (*Traubel and Smith look at each other in perplexity, and dig into their pockets.*)

TRAUBEL

Twenty dollars!—I've got sixty-three cents. I wonder if Mrs. Davis——

SMITH (*counting his assets*)

Two-forty—— (*A jangle of the doorbell, offstage.*)

TRAUBEL

Hullo, I guess that's Dick Davis, he said he was coming to-night. Maybe he can help—— (*Exits.*)

OYSTER MAN (*aggrieved*)

I didn't go to make a fuss about it, mister, but when they sing out for oysters like that, seems though they ought to pay. (*Smith, a*

WALT

youth of few words, remains silent, embarrassed.)
Why don't the old man shell out? He's bought himself a big buryin' lot out at Harleigh, he used to drive round with a hoss and buggy, he must have coin——

(Reënter Traubel with Richard Harding Davis, a handsome, well set-up youngster of twenty-four, a reporter for the Philadelphia "Press.")

TRAUBEL

Dick Davis, this is Logan Pearsall Smith. Dick, have you got any money?

DAVIS *(already, even in youth, he has something of his Olympian manner)*

Sure. How much do you want?

TRAUBEL

About seventeen dollars.

DAVIS

Ye gods! That isn't money, that's a fortune. *(Takes money from his pocket, goes toward lamp to count it)*—I can let you have two and a quarter—no, two-fifteen. I've got to go back on the ferry.

OYSTER MAN

That'll do fine. Make it four-fifty altogether. *(Davis looks round in surprise.)*

DAVIS

What is this, blackmail?

TRAUBEL

It's the oyster man. He's got to be paid. Give me two dollars. *(Turns to Smith:)* And two from you. That's four sixty-three——

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DAVIS (*whose observant eye has seen the bill on the mantel*)

Here's a five-spot, how about that?

TRAUBEL

What, five dollars? Where did it come from?

DAVIS

It's on the shelf here——

TRAUBEL (*takes it, goes to window, and gives money to the man*)

There, that's nine-sixty-three on account. I'll see you get the rest.—Hand over the oysters. (*The man disappears from window.*)

DAVIS (*studying objects on the mantel*)

Here's an autographed photo from Bob Ingersoll, maybe he'd take that in payment of the balance——

TRAUBEL (*horrified*)

Don't touch those things! They're awfully precious——

DAVIS (*in a cheerful, hearty way.*)

Say, is this where he does his work? Gee, it's kinda pathetic, ain't it? I'd like to get a picture of this room for the paper.—What's all this stuff, manuscript? (*He refers to the papers on the floor, and bends down to pick up a sheet he finds almost under his foot.*) Farringford Freshwater, Isle of Wight . . . Holy Mackerel, it's a letter from Lord Tennyson. . . . (*Holds it out reverently for the others to see.*) Well, what do you think of that? (*Puts letter carefully on mantel.*)

WALT

TRAUBEL (*proudly*)

He gets letters from all over the world. There was some lady of the nobility in England knitted him a vest, I had to get it out of the Custom House for him, it wasn't big enough——

OYSTER MAN (*reappearing*)

Here's the oysters. (*Hands in a cardboard box which Traubel takes.*) And your receipt. Sorry I made a fuss, gents, but you know how it is——

TRAUBEL

Sure. That's all right. Thanks. (*Man exits.*) I'll see you fellows get your money back. Tom Harned and Dr. Bucke and I have a fund——

DAVIS

Nonsense. It's worth it. Gee, I could make a bully story out of this. Oyster Man's Opinion of Good Gray Poet. It'd go fine in the Sunday supplement——

TRAUBEL (*angrily*)

Don't you dare! Can't you understand these things are sacred? (*Listens.*) Sssh! By jiminy, I believe he's coming down. (*He shuts the window quickly and goes to open the door. The three stand waiting attentively. There is the sound of a heavy tread coming laboriously down creaking stairs, a step at a time. Mrs. Davis's voice is heard, anxiously protesting.*)

MRS. DAVIS (*off*)

You know, Doctor said you'd better stay upstairs this evening.

ONE ACT PLAYS

WALT (*off*)

Now, Mary, you leave me alone. I'll manage.

TRAUBEL (*to the others*)

He hates to be helped. (*He takes the box of oysters and stands in the doorway.*) Oysters, Walt!

(*Mrs. Davis appears in doorway, takes box from Traubel.*)

MRS. DAVIS

I'll fix you a nice little stew——

(*She crosses to the armchair, L, turns it a little away from window and toward stove, puts a cushion in it, and stands beside it. There is a very brief pause. Traubel is at the door, looking off, the other two young men by the sofa, R.*)

Walt enters, leaning heavily on a stout cane, moving slowly and with difficulty, dragging his left leg—his left arm and leg are both semi-paralyzed. He is nearly seventy, a big man, heavily built, and seeming even stouter than he is because his clothes are so loose. The fine head is still nobly impressive with its mane of white hair, shaggy brows, torrent of beard and moustache; but his colour is no longer the clear ruddy of earlier days. He has the dull pallor of an invalid who has been at least six months shut indoors. He wears a very roomy suit of thick gray cloth and a white soft shirt with a very wide attached collar which is spread outside the collar of his coat. The shirt has big cuffs which are turned back over his coat-sleeves, the hems of both collar and cuffs are trimmed with a fringe of

WALT

lace—this is the special gala shirt in which he used to go lecturing. Coarse blue woollen socks are loosely rolling down about his ankles, above very heavy low black shoes, whose laces are dragging untied. Across his vast waistcoat is a thick silver watch chain. He is wearing the wide sombrero that Mrs. Davis removed from the room a few minutes earlier; he often wears a hat indoors, it seems to bring him closer to the open air.

He shuffles through the doorway, his head bent, and halts just inside the room to draw breath. His eyes intently traverse the floor, toward the old trunk, as though looking for something. Traubel immediately kneels before him. For an instant the audience probably imagines that Horace is doing reverence to his divinity, but then sees that he is tying the shoelaces, which are of leather.)

TRAUBEL (*tying the laces*)

Well, this is fine! I didn't know you were coming down.

WALT

I took a notion to.—Maybe I wouldn't trust you alone with all these letters kicking about.

TRAUBEL

How d'you feel?

WALT

Why, right peart this evening, Horace. Had a bum spell this morning, head, belly, kidneys, everything. Always feel better in the evening, though. It's looking at the sunshine that makes me gag. (*He begins to shuffle painfully toward the chair, but his eyes are sharply scrutiniz-*

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ing a spot on the floor near the trunk. Traubel diligently removes any papers that lie in his path, and then replaces them exactly.) Mrs. Davis keeps me going. She's very good and cute.

MRS. DAVIS (*troubled*)

Oh, I don't think you'd ought to come down; you know what Doctor said——

WALT (*reaching chair, straightens up a little and looks at her steadily*)

I had to come down. (*Then, a little irritably, he pushes off the cushion with his cane, and with Mrs. Davis's help lowers himself into the chair, accidentally dropping the cane, which Traubel picks up and puts in his hand. He sits a moment as though resting or thinking, his eyes on the ceiling.*)

MRS. DAVIS

I'm going to bring you some broth, and by and by you can have the oysters (*She exits.*)

TRAUBEL

Walt, we've got callers this evening. You know Logan Pearsall Smith——

WALT (*coming back from a reverie; takes off his hat and drops it beside the chair*) Why, howdy, Logan, howdy. Haven't seen you since you were a youngster. Been away, haven't you?

SMITH

Yes, Walt; at Harvard.

WALT (*with a touch of irony*)

Ah. That's a long way away.

WALT

TRAUBEL

And this is Richard Harding Davis, son of Rebecca Davis. He works on the *Press*.

WALT

Glad to see you, Dick. Don't see many callers nowadays, except Horace vouches for 'em. He's my watchdog.

DAVIS

It's kind of you to let us see you.

WALT

Not much to see. An old hulk, rotting in the sand.—Horace, what's the news? Did you bring the mail?

TRAUBEL

Yes, Walt. (*Takes half a dozen letters from his pocket and hands them to Walt.*)

WALT

Ah, that's good. I can't get along without letters. (*Glances at the envelopes.*) Looks mostly like an autograph mail.—Never mind, they're always useful. (*Explaining to the others:*) I use the back of the paper for writing on.

DAVIS (*like the alert newspaper man he is, immediately beginning to lead toward some topic that may provide interesting "copy"*)

I suppose you get all kinds?

WALT (*with a quiet chuckle*)

Yes. The other day a fellow wrote me he'd heard I was going to die soon, would I please

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send him an autograph first. He was so damned impudent, I sent it. Autograph collecting is the Great American Passion. (*Slyly:*) I think even Horace here is touched with it.

DAVIS

But don't you keep the letters you get from famous people?

WALT

I reckon I keep most everything (*A pause.*) . . . or did till lately. But letters from célèbres, cultivés, philosophs, don't do me as much good as a hello from plain folks who once in a while get a notion you might be some shucks. The célèbres, savants, have always taken me with an *if*.

DAVIS

I've been reading Robert Louis Stevenson's essay about you——

WALT

Stevenson, the Scotchman, yes, he's a fine fellow I guess, they tell me he's a coming man. He had a Leaves of Grass spasm, but he got over it. He rolled me round in his mouth, and then decided to spit out. Said I was lacking in taste, humour, was a bull in a china shop.—Maybe he was right.

TRAUBEL

Aren't there some things too important to be humorous about?

WALT

Horace, you're right cute. Maybe that don't

WALT

quite hit the nail on the head, but it shows where the nail can be found.

DAVIS

But gee, don't you think that fellow Stevenson can tell a story like a house afire?

WALT

I tried to read some of his things, I don't know, I couldn't seem to get my teeth in. Too nice, too whimsical, too much fiddling with words, pretty palaver. You know his wife came here to see me last year, a fine woman, she was Philadelphia Dutch. She told me Stevenson felt a lot more enthused about the "Leaves" than he let on in his piece. Well, there you are. He didn't trust his instinct, been too much educated maybe, too much college.—Horace, you ought to give me a nudge. I guess Logan and Dick is probably both college——

TRAUBEL

Yes, Walt, you put your foot in it. Logan has been to Haverford and Harvard, and Dick to Lehigh and Johns Hopkins——

SMITH

Worse still, I'm planning to go to Oxford next year——

WALT

Gosh, Horace, you and I would better polish up our culture. Well, I got nothing against Oxford, against colleges. Once I was invited to Dartmouth by the students; when I got there I found it was some kind of a joke the boys was fixing

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to put up on the professors. They thought Walt Whitman was a sort of a wild man, a gorilla, and the faculty would be scared to fits when they saw him. Well, I read them a piece; I reckon it didn't tally with what they were looking for.

TRAUBEL

I guess the joke was on them.

WALT

But Oxford, I've got reasons to be grateful to Oxford, I allow there must have been Oxford men in that little bunch of Englishmen that came to my rescue. Staunch, loving, open-handed fellows, Rossetti, Symonds, Dowden, Edward Carpenter, Ruskin, Saintsbury, Moncure Conway. . . . I was down, down at the bottom, the appearance of that group was like a flash out of Heaven.—No, I've got nothing against colleges, Horace, if you take 'em for what they're worth; don't let 'em dry up the sap in you.

DAVIS

You never got to Europe, did you, to visit those people?

WALT

No. On the whole, I don't regret it. "Leaves of Grass" got itself out over here, somehow or other. It's a This-Side book. You youngsters, you're going to be the American writers of the next thirty years, that's what we need, more This-Side books. Logan, don't let those Oxford savans knock that out of you, don't forget we promulge something in the air here that

WALT

Matthew Arnold and the Oxford gang never quite tumbled to. (*He meditates a moment, then chuckles.*) But hell: I'm not literary, I oughtn't even to talk about these things.

(*Enter Mrs. Davis with a cup of broth and some toast.*)

MRS. DAVIS

Now take that while it's nice and hot—

WALT (*impatiently*)

No, no, Mary, I don't feel for it just now.

MRS. DAVIS

Oh, do, beef broth, it's so good and hot——

WALT (*waves her away*)

Not now, Mary, it's too hot in here already. (*With a touch of humour.*) Must have been those old papers I was burning this morning, I might have known they'd steam up that damn stove.—Horace, don't you feel it hot in here? Is it cold outside?

TRAUBEL

Why, yes, Walt, it's pretty cold; clear, though.

WALT

Stars shining? *Are* there still stars?—Logan, you get about a lot, be sure to let me know if anything ever happens to the stars. (*He pauses rather wistfully, tries to peer toward the window, lifting the curtain with his cane.*) I suppose it's one of God's perfect nights.—Mary, bring back the soup some night when it's raining.

(*Exit Mrs. Davis.*)

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TRAUBEL

If you think it's hot, Walt, I'll open the front door a moment. (*He follows Mrs. Davis to the door, and stands behind it—hidden from Walt, but in view of the audience, jotting down some memoranda in his notebook. Meanwhile:*)

DAVIS

Mr. Whitman, you're an old newspaper man, maybe you'll advise me. I've had an invitation to go to New York, work on the *Sun*.

WALT

Yes, that's all right, if you don't get fooled by the New York crowd of scrawlers. Nice fellows all, but too much impressed with the importance of parlours, literature, singing. Look what happened to Poe; there was tragedy for you, making a living writing that puffball stuff about the Literati. I saw him once, poor devil, he looked pale, tired, jaded. There was death in his face, death of the body, death of the spirit. Plague take the Literati! My stuff's not literature at all, more like a kind of fertilizer for future literature. Yes, I guess that's what I am, boys, a kind of manure. (*Davis starts to say something, but Walt, absorbed in his own thought, goes on.*) I know what I'm talking about. I used to write little pieces for the papers, book reviews, tattle, editorials on politics, the usual run of shad, come-day go-day palaver. Then something happened. I remember one day I got a kind of a desperation, I put down some lines in a notebook, "I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves. I am the poet of the body

WALT

and I am the poet of the soul." That was the beginning of the "Leaves." I guess maybe it don't amount to much.

SMITH (*hesitatingly, but with signs of sincere thought*)
It amounts to a great deal, Walt. You made it easier for others to say what they really think.

WALT
Well, maybe so. "Leaves of Grass" is more of a person than a book.

TRAUBEL (*who has been listening attentively, finishes his notes and returns, closing the door*)
You said once it was like the flukes of a whale—not graceful, but effective.

WALT
Did I? Well, it'll take fifty years to tell. I can say this, though, no one will get at my verses who insists on thinking of 'em as a literary performance.

DAVIS (*seeing here an opportunity to work toward his assignment*)
The newspaper wanted me to find out what you think about the election of Harrison.

WALT
Just this—fifty years hence people will be saying "Harrison? Harrison? Who was Harrison?" Oh, I used to be a kind of a sort of a Republican, but those things don't mean much to me any more. You can't make rules about anything—diet, drink, God, even the tariff. No, Dick, you tell 'em that Walt Whitman is an ignorant old man and don't have anything to

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say. I never did *know* things, anyhow; I just *feel*. I distrust politicians, they're like the ministers, poor devils: think of the forty-and-odd corns they've got to avoid treading on.

DAVIS

What are you working on now, do you mind my saying something about that?

WALT

Horace, get a couple of the "November Boughs." Maybe these boys would like to buy copies——
(*Smith and Davis look at each other in embarrassment.*)

TRAUBEL (*gets two copies from the sofa*)

No, Walt, I think we can afford to *give* them these. The printer's all paid now.

WALT (*takes his spectacles from case on the shelf and puts them on, dips pen in ink, and very slowly and carefully signs his name in each book, holding it on his knee to do so. As he signs, he continues talking, slowly*)

It won't be long now, I'll kick the bucket, you boys will be asked what kind of a fellow was that old scalawag Walt Whitman. Tell the truth. Don't prettify him. Say you saw him, an old shabby man, bumming a living from good-hearted folks, alone with his memories.

TRAUBEL (*greatly moved*)

Walt . . . dear Walt . . . you aren't alone.

WALT

Bless you, Horace. I know. But everyone is alone, mostly. (*Handing the books to Smith*)

WALT

and Davis, who murmur their thanks but find no words appropriate.) Here you are. My love to you both. . . . Logan, boy, I like your looks; I believe you think. After I'm gone it may be harder to save me from my friends than from the others. Great poets need great audiences, too.

SMITH

I think perhaps we ought——

WALT

No, boys, don't go yet. Sit down. We're having a good visit. They're some grapes there, from John Burroughs; help yourselves. . . . Don't mind the mess. The disorder is more apparent than real. I had a house-cleaning to-day, was burning some old things—— No, Horace, none of your meat! Things that were only for me. A woman, a very noble woman, said once, "I had not dreamed that words could cease to be words and become electric streams." . . . Yes, my book was meant for lonely people, hungry people——

TRAUBEL (*hoping to lead the talk into a lighter vein*)

Well, Walt, I suppose a little loneliness is the natural penalty of being a bachelor.

WALT (*a flash of the lion*)

Not too much of a bachelor, if you knew it all. It's a queer thing, the one question I'm asked, more than any other, is why I never married. Marriage is the most difficult of all relations, needs so much tact, unselfishness, patience, all

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the delicacies, I should think folks would ask why a man *did* marry, not why he didn't——

DAVIS (*with the anxious pertinacity of a reporter who hasn't yet got hold of anything he can "use"*)

Do you feel like making any statement about marriage as an institution? (*Davis is sublimely unconscious that he is on dangerous ground; Smith, and even Traubel, both more sensitive than the young reporter, hold their breaths for fear that Walt will be angry; and for a moment Walt's gaze is rather steely; but eventually he smiles to himself, and merely says:*)

WALT

Not by a jugful.—But I know what you're after. You want something cut-and-dried, something in black and white that you can put in the paper——

DAVIS

That's it, that's the ticket!

WALT (*poking round with his cane among the litter on the floor*)

There's an old scrap round here, I saw it this morning.—There, Horace, right under your heel—— (*Traubel picks up a dingy bit of paper.*)
That's it. Read it aloud.

TRAUBEL (*reads*)

"Go on, my dear Americans, whip your horses to the utmost—Excitement! Money! Politics!—open all your valves and let her go, whirl with the rest, you will soon get under such momentum you can't stop if you would. Only make pro-

WALT

vision betimes for several thousand insane asylums. You are in a fair way to create a nation of lunatics."

DAVIS

Great! Can I use it?

WALT

If you want to. It's never been printed.

DAVIS

When was it written?

WALT

Oh, I don't know—a few months ago, maybe.—Horace, you have a hungry look. I believe you want that scrap yourself. (*Traubel's face shows that he does.*)—Dick, you copy it and then let Horace have it. He collects these curios. (*Again rummaging with his stick.*) Lots of odds and ends.

DAVIS

Do you care to say anything about the American poetry of the future?

WALT (*as he pokes*)

Better leave that to the future poets themselves. They'll have plenty to say. (*Digs out with his cane some letters tied up with twine, which Smith picks up and hands to him.*) Letters from editors, turning down some of my things. Here's one from an editor you may have heard of. (*He reads one of the letters.*) "I fear that the Passage to India is a poem too long and too abstract for the hasty and material-minded

ONE ACT PLAYS

readers of the *Overland Monthly*. Your obedient servant, F. Bret Harte."

TRAUBEL (*loyally indignant*)

Passage to India! One of your finest things——

WALT

I guess Bret was quite right. That sort of thing don't go down, don't digest, in the magazines.

SMITH

There's a line in that poem that always seemed to me very characteristic of you. I can't quote it, but it was something about "larkspur and wild onions."

WALT

Why, that's real cute of you, Logan. (*He chuckles thoughtfully.*) Yes, likely it is. Well, the wild onion is just as pretty as the larkspur, and a blame sight more tasty in soup.—Horace, I'm beginning to think about that oyster stew.

TRAUBEL

I'll tell Mrs. Davis. (*Exit. Smith and Davis rise to leave.*)

WALT

Will you boys stay and have supper?

SMITH

Oh, no, thanks, Walt; we'd better be going.

DAVIS

I must get to the office.

WALT

WALT

All right. I'm glad you came. My love to your families. (*They shake his hand, with engagingly youthful deference.*) Logan, your folks have been specially good to me. Tell 'em I said so.

SMITH and DAVIS

Good-night!

(*They leave, and Walt is alone. His whole manner changes; he looks sharply about with quick craftiness, his eyes return to a spot between the stove and the trunk, where there lies a little packet of soiled letters tied with a faded tape. Slowly, painfully, he raises himself from the chair, trembling on the stout cane. With twitching face and quivering limbs he shuffles clumsily past the stove, toward the packet. He is now quite close to the footlights; it is evident that he is pitiably eager to do what his strength can hardly accomplish. He makes a gallant attempt to reach the letters. Leaning heavily on the cane in his right hand, he bends down, slowly, slowly, groping with his half paralyzed left arm, which shakes and wavers stiffly. His legs tremble, his breath comes pantingly, his lips move constantly as though speaking to himself, but no sound issues. To reach the letters he has to fall on hands and knees, and the cane clatters to the floor. At last his right hand is on the packet. He takes it, shakingly, with an air of triumph. As he turns it over, sprawling grotesquely on all fours, the audience sees that an old tintype photo is tied under the tape at the bottom of the packet. This slips out, he retrieves it with difficult fingers, looks at it.*

ONE ACT PLAYS

Then a strange thing happens. It is as though he had forgotten his old age, his weakness. Without seeming aware of it himself, he rises to his feet, as easily, surely, as a young man. He stands, holding the letters and the picture, a noble and Jove-like figure. Slowly, radiantly, he raises his arms (holding letters and photo in his right hand) as an athlete will stretch his muscles with the sheer thrill of strength. His chest expands, his head lifts, he seems taller. For a miraculous moment he is once more the Walt of the "Song of Myself," of "Children of Adam." His arms are outstretched above his head, trembling a little—with a quivering which might be either strength or weakness; a gesture which might be one of superb triumph or of supplication to some unknown source of joy. Then, dropping his arms, with an easy careless gesture (you remember how fond he was of the word "nonchalant") he tosses the letters and photo through the open door of the stove and snaps it shut.)

WALT (in a voice surprisingly deep and resonant)

Good-bye . . . My Fancy . . . (And then suddenly he seems to remember that he is an old crippled man. He slumps, shrivels, totters, puts out his hand awkwardly as though to reach for the cane, and collapses weakly and heavily against the backless chair by the stove, drooped over it with his knees on the floor. At that moment Traubel enters, carrying a glass of port wine.)

TRAUBEL (as he enters)

Mary says—— (Sharply, fearfully:) Walt! What's the matter? (Puts down glass hastily and runs forward.) What's wrong?—Walt!

W A L T

(Lifts the old man to his feet, helps him tenderly to the chair, where he sinks back with closed eyes.)—
What is it Walt?—I'll get the Doctor.—Walt!

WALT *(slowly, feebly)*

All right, Horace . . . Doctors can't do anything . . . the clock's running down.

TRAUBEL *(getting the glass of wine)*

Here's your port wine, take that, it'll help.
*(Walt drinks it, weakly.)—*Wait a minute, I'll call Mary——

WALT

No, I'm all right——

TRAUBEL *(sees cane downstage, gets it)*

Why, what were you doing, Walt?

WALT

It won't last much longer, Horace . . .
"This long disease, my life" . . . who said that?—I don't mind, now——

TRAUBEL *(anxiously)*

Don't you think I'd better get Osler——

WALT *(stronger)*

No, no . . . *(Rouses himself a little.)* We didn't look at the mail; that's the best tonic. The mail is always full of life. *(He reaches for the letters on the table; spills them. Traubel picks them up.)*

WALT

Read them to me, Horace.

ONE ACT PLAYS

TRAUBEL

Here's one from Australia. We'll take that first. (*Reads:*)

GIRLS' GRAMMAR SCHOOL,
MARYBOROUGH, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

SIR:

You have had, I do not doubt, many a letter of warm appreciation from people of eminent talent, but I am only what I think in America you call a "school marm" and of no "eminence," but I expect it's the average intellect you most want to touch as they form the bulk of the living beings. I have only had the pleasure so far of reading two of your books, "Leaves of Grass" and "Specimen Days." They are both moral tonics in their joyous healthiness and seem to me just the antidote that is needed to the sickly sentimentality of the present age. I never read them without feeling more strongly what a beautiful sane thing human life is. I wish, as I am a woman, you had told us more of your views about us. I wonder what your ideal of woman is.

(At this point, Traubel pauses to turn over the page and to make out a word. Walt's eyes turn to the stove.)

WALT

Horace, open the stove door, will you? (*Traubel does so, and reads the rest of the letter aloud from where he stands.*)

TRAUBEL (*reading*)

I should not have ventured to write only I see you are alone, and that is a word which always touches me, specially now, when as an English teacher in a new land I am without one friend near me. A thousand thanks, dear Walt Whitman, for all you have written.

JESSIE TAYLOR.

WALT (*after a brief pause, watching the glow in the stove, speaking rather drowsily*)

Well, now, that's nice, that's a real nice howdy . . . A fire smokes when it's first lit, but when it's dying it burns clear, rosy, tender——

(Enter Mrs. Davis.)

WALT

MRS. DAVIS

If you'll be getting upstairs, I'll have the stew all ready for you soon's you're in bed.

WALT

Mary's right, Horace. She's always right. We'll leave the rest of those letters till to-morrow.

TRAUBEL

Shall I help you upstairs?

WALT

Bed, bed's the place. Oh, the dear bed, when a fellow's in the dumps the bed gives him a sort of freedom. . . . No, Horace, Mary and I'll manage. Good-night, dear boy. (*Traubel comes to him and kisses his forehead.*)

TRAUBEL

Good-night, Walt.

WALT (*his mind is rambling a little.*)

You might write to Jessie Taylor; tell her we've got a title for the last section of the new book . . .

TRAUBEL

A title? Oh, that's fine, Walt, you didn't tell me——

WALT

Didn't I? Yes. Good-bye, My Fancy. (*A pause.*) Tell her I wrote my book for lonely people.

TRAUBEL

See you to-morrow. Now you get a good sleep.

ONE ACT PLAYS

WALT

You bet. Good-night, Horace, bless you. (*Troubel goes out.*)

(Walt sits alone a moment; then, as he is awkwardly rising from the chair, Mrs. Davis comes in and helps him. He shuffles across the room with her support. As he nears the door he pauses, turns, and looks at the stove, which is shining rosily. He says gently, as if to himself, "Good-Bye, My Fancy." And the curtain falls.)

EAST OF EDEN

To James Kendall Burgess.

CHARACTERS

CAIN

ENOCH, *a baby*

CAIN'S WIFE

ADAM

EVE

EAST OF EDEN

The scene is laid in the Fourth Chapter of Genesis, the sixteenth verse. It is the home of Cain and his wife, in "the land of Nod." Genesis is not very explicit, so I shall have to rely on imagination in describing the setting; and I am willing to allow much leeway to the director in arranging his stage.

Cain was evidently an ingenious fellow, with architectural talent, for eventually he "builded a city." Therefore we may fairly surmise that he has made himself some sort of habitable dwelling, even if only in a cave. What we see when the curtain rises is an harbour outside that dwelling. It is on a hilltop, looking off toward Paradise Lost. The back-drop represents a distant view of Eden, beyond a river and fields and vineyards shining in a rich sunset light. Every group of amateur players has at least one artist who will thoroughly enjoy painting this backdrop, in which he can let his fancy run freely. He can even limn, if he desires, the Tree of Trees (Inter folia fructus) rising on the skyline, and the flaming sword at the exit. But if he funks such detail, the effect can be achieved by a light blue curtain at the rear, suggesting that Cain and his wife look from their hilltop exile, through airy distances, on the irretrievable innocence of mankind.

ONE ACT PLAYS

The little stage where they find themselves is really the first sleeping porch in history. It is just a small terrace of level ground that catches the afternoon light, shaded by a vine that grows, R and L, on a rudely constructed trellis. Downstage, L, is an opening curtained with skins that leads into the inner quarters. Not far from this opening a small fire is burning between two large flat stones, on which is propped a steaming earthenware crock. On the R, under the overhanging foliage of the vine, is a rough shelf or workbench on which are some bowls clumsily shaped of sun-baked clay, a bundle of dried grasses for weaving, and perhaps also some primitive tools and weapons—such as a hammer made of a stone lashed to a stick with a rawhide thong, and a bow and arrows. Toward the R, downstage, are two large skins spread out neatly, side by side, each with a sort of bolster or pillow made of hide and stuffed with hay. Two or three other skins are scattered about. On one of these, in the middle of the stage, Cain is sprawled.

Cain wears a suit of skins, consisting of hairy shorts and a kind of mantle which leaves his arms bare. His arms and his bare shins are tanned a deep brown by exposure: his hair is very long and curly. I suppose he has also got to have a beard, though I should prefer him without it. We are to imagine him as a man of quick jealous temper (or he wouldn't have quarrelled with Abel) but there is also a rather appealing wistfulness about him, as though he is still a bit puzzled about his punishment and exile, and not yet wholly convinced that it will be man's destiny to work so hard

EAST OF EDEN

for a living. But when the curtain rises we find him in a happy mood: he is stretched at his ease on the ground playing with the baby.

Yes, there is a baby, in a little furry tunic. His name is Enoch (see Genesis IV, 17) and he's about fifteen months old. Now the chief purpose of writing plays is to get them performed, and if none of the amateur players in this Club wants to lend a real baby for stage purposes we'll have to use a large doll, one that can utter a lifelike lamentation. In that case we shall have to put the doll in some sort of wide-meshed wicker basket or an ark made of bullrushes (cf. Exodus II, 3) through the interstices of which it will be visible to the audience. But I'm going to write as though we had a real baby: if a doll is used the resourceful director will know how to adapt it to our requirements. So you imagine the baby on the skin rug with Cain, crawling about gaily as he plays with it. Cain shakes a gourd, in which the dry seeds rattle noisily, and Enoch is delighted.

All right: now we can go ahead. I'm assuming that you've gathered your audience, made them pay a small entrance-fee (enough to cover your expenses); and that you've informed the author's agent of your intention to produce the play, and paid the modest royalty (for if a play is worth performing at all, it's worth paying for) and the curtain goes up.

CAIN (bursting into laughter as he plays with the baby)
Big boy, big boy, big boy!
A great big baby

ONE ACT PLAYS

In the land of Nod—
Ho, ho, ho,
What a joke on God!

(He pauses and considers. Then he says these four lines again, emphasizing the rhyme, and seems proud of himself. He sticks his legs up in the air and turns a backward somersault in glee. The baby crows with admiration. Cain says:) Did you hear that? When the words sound like each other, it makes you feel good. I wonder if we could do it again? *(He plays with the baby's toes.)*

Enoch, Enoch, in the land of Nod——
(Then, after a pause, with a shout of triumph:)
His toes are as tiny as peas in a pod!

(He goes into an ecstasy of self-esteem over this, tosses the baby up and down.) My, my, we do have a good time, don't we? *(At this moment the pot of milk on the fire begins to boil ever, but Cain, absorbed in his game with Enoch, doesn't notice it.)*

CAIN'S WIFE *(off)*

Cain! Cain! *(Cain looks startled, hastily puts the child into its ark or wicker basket.)*

CAIN

Yes?

WIFE *(off)*

Is baby's milk warm yet? *(He looks anxiously at the pot, which he has quite forgotten, and thrusts his hand into it, withdrawing it with an exclamation.)*

EAST OF EDEN

CAIN

Wow!—(Calling:) Yes, it's getting on nicely.

WIFE (off)

Give it to him, then.

(Cain takes the pot off the fire, gets a small bowl from the shelf, and dips some milk into it. He sits cross-legged beside the basket and—apparently, at any rate—tilts some milk into the child's mouth. It is too hot, and Enoch utters a yell.

Cain's wife enters through the opening, L. She is rather a lovely savage in her fur jerkin and short skirt of fig-leaves. Her skin is a beautiful bronzy colour, her long hair is down her back and decorated with a peacock feather. Cain tries to calm the baby.

WIFE

What's the matter?

CAIN

I don't know. Maybe he isn't hungry.

WIFE (rapidly investigating)

It's too hot. Gracious, I can't even trust you to give him his food. *(Picks child up from basket.)* There, there! Did silly old man try to burn out inside of him's moufy? *(To Cain:)* You take him while I cool it. *(She hands the child to Cain and sits down to cool the milk by the simple expedient of dipping her hand into it, ladling it up in her palm, and pouring it back into the bowl. Cain, holding the baby, walks to the rear and looks off at the view.)*

ONE ACT PLAYS

CAIN

How pretty Eden looks this afternoon.—Do you think God would be angry if He knew we have a baby?

WIFE

He mustn't find out! If God knew about it, He might take him away——

CAIN

It's an awful joke on God. He sent the baby as a punishment, and if He found out that we *like* it, He'd be furious.

WIFE

It was a queer way of punishing *you*, to send the baby to *me*.

CAIN

Probably that was just a mistake that bird made——

WIFE

That *bird*?

CAIN

That big bird you told me about, the one that left him here——

WIFE

Oh . . . Oh, yes. (*Smiles a little to herself.*)

CAIN

Of course I don't blame God for being angry. But when I hit Abel I didn't know *that* would happen to him. I didn't know he'd get all soft, and cold. I didn't mean——

EAST OF EDEN

WIFE (*referring to the milk*)

There, I think that's all right.

(*She rises and crosses to Cain to take the baby. She gazes off at the valley.*) How that Tree stands up in the middle of Eden. It seems to get taller and taller. Sometimes I'm worried; if God climbed up to the top of it he might be able to look all the way over here and see Enoch.

CAIN (*speaking with the air of a practical man*)

No, that'd be a hard tree to climb. The bark's too slippery——

WIFE (*in sudden alarm*)

Cain, Cain! Come here!

CAIN

What is it?

WIFE

There's someone coming . . . down by the river (*She points.*) . . . There!

CAIN (*looking*)

So there is. Two of 'em.

WIFE

It's two of those dreadful Cherubim . . . I can see the flaming sword. (*She snatches the child from him and holds it with a protecting gesture.*)

CAIN (*looking more carefully*)

The sunset is so bright, it's hard to tell. . . .
No, that isn't a flaming sword, it's a beard. . .
. . . Good heavens! (*horrified*) it's Adam and Eve.

ONE ACT PLAYS

WIFE

What *shall* we do? They mustn't see——

CAIN

How did they get here? Why, they live way on the other side——

WIFE

They mustn't know we've got a baby. They'd be awfully disgusted——

CAIN

This is terrible. If Adam knew, he might tell God——

WIFE

I don't worry about Adam. We can fool *him*. But how am I going to keep it from Eve? They've never been here before; she'll want to see everything——

CAIN (*looking off*)

Gosh, he gets along pretty spry for a man of his age. . . . They'll be here in a minute.

WIFE

Quick! I'll see if I can put him to sleep, somewhere out of sight.—You take the bassinette——
—(*They bustle about. She picks up a skin and the gourd, and hurries off with the baby, Cain follows with the bowl of milk and the ark. For a moment the stage is left empty; then Adam and Eve appear at the back. In spite of their age—Adam is 130 and Eve only 15 verses younger—they are a well-preserved couple. Adam has a huge long*

EAST OF EDEN

red beard and walks with a staff. Eve has lost something of her Garden of Eden slimness, but is still a fine matronly figure. They wear kilts of fig leaves and "coats of skins" and have primitive hide moccasins or sandals on their feet. They pause at the back of the stage to remove these.)

ADAM (*always the gentleman*)

Let me help you, my dear. (*Takes off her sandals.*)—Phew, that was a long climb. (*Puts his hand to his side.*)

EVE

I suppose this is the place.

ADAM

They seem to be pretty comfortably fixed.

EVE (*looking about*)

I wonder if she's a good housekeeper?

ADAM

Of course we ought to have called long ago, but there's always so much to do.—Do you know her name?

EVE

No . . . I don't know *who* she is. I never did understand where she came from.

ADAM

Yes, it's very queer. You and me and Cain and Abel—who else *was* there, unless he married the Serpent?

EVE

I must ask her about her family.

ONE ACT PLAYS

ADAM

If only poor Abel had lived—he was the really promising one——

(*Enter Cain, through the opening L.*)

CAIN

Well! This *is* a surprise! (*Embraces Eve.*)

Mother, how are you—Father, you don't look a day older.

ADAM

I'm not what I used to be. I get a stitch in my side when I walk uphill. . . . It's that old trouble with my rib.

CAIN

Sit down and rest. (*They squat down on the ground.*)

EVE

We should have come before, but we didn't know exactly where you lived. Of course we wanted to see your wife——

CAIN

She'll be here in a minute——

EVE

And to-day being Adam's birthday, we felt the family ought to celebrate——

CAIN

Your birthday! Well, well, many happy returns— Let's see, I've forgotten exactly how——

ADAM

A hundred and thirty.

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CAIN

Oh, a mere nothing, Dad. You've got five or six hundred useful years ahead of you——

EVE

I don't like him to keep telling his age, though. Everyone knows he and I are so nearly the same——

ADAM

I think you picked out a very nice location.

EVE

We like to stay nearer Eden, it has so many old associations for us——

ADAM

Your mother used to talk about moving up here on the heights——

EVE

But Father enjoys having a chat with the cherubim down at the East Gate——

ADAM

Yes, some of those fellows are quite friendly; they tell me what's going on in the Garden. They say the Serpent's getting a bit old. He was awfully good company when he was young. Your mother can tell you——

EVE

But the soil *is* so terrible where we are, your poor father has to work day and night and we don't get much more than thorns and thistles ——
(*Enter Cain's wife.*)

ONE ACT PLAYS

WIFE (*a little nervously*)

How do you do? So nice of you to come.

CAIN

Dear, this is my mother and father——

WIFE

I thought it must be——

EVE (*kissing her*)

Well, my dear child, let's have a good look at you!—What a charming dress. (*To Cain:*)
I see she has taste.

ADAM (*climbing to his feet*)

Does the old man get a nice hug? (*He does.*)
Delightful, delightful!—My boy, she reminds me of your mother when I first knew her. (*Pats his daughter-in-law's arm, and speaks to Eve:*)
A little browner than you were, my dear. It was shady in the Garden, we didn't get so tanned. I can still remember how white you were, against those green fig trees.—Those were the days!

EVE (*to Adam*)

Please don't talk about the Garden. The poor child will be horrified——

WIFE

You must be tired after your walk. Sit down and have some fruit——(*She gets some apples and grapes from the shelf, offers Adam an apple.*)

ADAM (*about to take it, then looks at Eve, and refrains*)

No, thanks. I never eat fruit any more. It . . . it don't agree with me.

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EVE

Well . . . I hope Cain makes a good husband?

WIFE

He's a darling. (*Sits by Cain, with her arm about him.*) I'm afraid he works too hard.

CAIN

We've rather given up agriculture. I'm starting a kind of development up here, I'm figuring on building a city——

WIFE

Cain thinks this region has a great future. He says it's fine for young couples because the chil—— (*She pauses in dismay, realizing she has almost given away their secret; but garrulous old Adam saves her slip from being noticed.*)

ADAM

The chill? I'm sure it can't be as damp here as it is down where we are.—I believe the climate's changing.

EVE

Eden was the place for climate. Simply ideal.

ADAM

You wouldn't believe how simple and easy housekeeping was there. I remember the Serpent saying that really, where everything was so convenient, two could live cheaper than one.

EVE

Adam, do you see how cleverly they've got that fire fixed, between two stones? Why didn't

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we think of that? And that sideboard over there (*pointing to the shelf*), that must be very useful. (*To Cain's wife:*) I hope you're going to let me see all your arrangements. I'm sure you've thought of a lot of things that Adam could copy——

WIFE

Cain, why don't you show your mother that nice little stable you made for the live-stock——

EVE

No, no, I mean the kitchen. What do you do to keep the milk sweet, this hot weather? Down in the valley it's really been dreadful.

ADAM

It isn't the heat one minds, it's the humidity——

CAIN

I believe you're right. I never thought of that before.

WIFE (*getting up*)

Come along, then——

ADAM (*admiring her costume*)

Mother, d'you see how she's got her skirt fixed behind? Why don't you do yours that way?

WIFE (*to Eve*)

You see, this is a kind of sleeping porch——

ADAM (*noticing the two skins side by side, R*)

Separate beds! Mother, that's quite an idea——

WIFE

We'll go outside, I want to show you——

EAST OF EDEN

ADAM

I want to see things, too. (*Starts to rise.*)

EVE

No, Father, you stay here and have a nice visit with Cain. (*To Cain:*) He needs someone to talk to.

(*Eve and Cain's wife exeunt at rear.*)

CAIN

Mother seems well.

ADAM

She's a wonderful woman. I don't know what I'd have done without her. But it *is* nice to have someone else to talk to. I get fed up with those Cherubim. Their conversation lacks variety.

CAIN

Now you've found the way here, you must come more often.

ADAM

I'm glad to see you doing so well. You were pretty wild as a youngster. I used to wonder whether we'd ever raise you. Never having been a boy myself, I didn't realize how full of devilment they are.

CAIN

Yes, you were pretty severe. I remember what a licking you gave me because I shinned over the wall and got back into the Garden to play with the animals. I didn't know it was Eden, I thought it was just a kind of Zoo——

ONE ACT PLAYS

ADAM

I like your wife. I might have known you'd pick out a good-looker. Chip of the old block, hey?

CAIN

You didn't have much choice, did you?

ADAM

Oh, yes, I did. (*Lowers his voice:*) There was another woman floating about the Garden, you know. A person called Lilith. You probably never heard of her. Your mother never mentions her.

CAIN

I suppose you do get homesick for the good old days, before the Fall——

ADAM

Ssssh! Not so loud! (*Cautiously:*) I'll tell you something. I'm always afraid Jehovah will change his mind and send us back there. It was a picnic while it lasted, but you know we couldn't go on living like that. It was too informal altogether. And then every time I'd forget myself, and be having a little fun, God would yell out at me and scare me half to death. What with God shouting from the treetops, and the Serpent whispering underfoot, it was too much of a good thing. (*He looks nervously toward Eden, over his shoulder.*) I don't think it's wise to talk too much about these matters.

(*Cain remains silent, looking thoughtfully toward Eden.*) Besides, I believe God expected us to

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do exactly what we did. At any rate, that's what the Serpent says. He says God doesn't really care, and that the Cherubim are just a bluff.

CAIN

But how about those flaming swords?

ADAM

The Serpent says they're not swords at all, just an optical illusion. He says they've got little bits of looking glass in their hands and they flash the sunlight into your eyes and you *think* it's flaming swords.—But I don't know, the whole thing's too much for me. I'm not quite sure how far to trust the Serpent. He's got an awful bruise on his head, and it may have made him sore.

CAIN

It's rather important to know. . . . Do you suppose God's still angry at *me*? (*The cry of a baby is heard, off L.*)

ADAM (*startled*)

What's that?

CAIN (*disturbed*)

One of the goats, outside.

ADAM (*relieved*)

Oh.—Gracious, it sounded like—like—never mind.

CAIN (*earnestly*)

But suppose what was sent as a curse and a punishment turned out to be a happiness: what then?

ONE ACT PLAYS

ADAM

Well, I wouldn't let God know about it. (*Again the baby's cry, unmistakable this time. Adam looks at Cain sharply. Both are greatly agitated.*) What!—You don't mean to say . . . (*Cain nods silently, much ashamed.*) But how . . . why . . . where did you get it?

CAIN

God's punishment, I suppose. He *said* He would brand me. Oh, I hoped you would never know.

ADAM

This is awful. Don't let your mother find out. —Does your wife know?

CAIN

I'd have hidden it from her if I could. But I was away when it happened, on a hunting trip. She said a big bird brought it.

ADAM

It's the family curse. The same thing happened to me. Just the same. Eve said a stork flew by and dropped it. It got bigger and bigger, and . . . why, *you're* it!

CAIN (*incredulous*)

Me?

ADAM

Yes. Oh, this is terrible. I thought it was just an accident that happened to us. I had no idea it was going to be a habit.

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CAIN

Then God *is* still angry.

ADAM (*in despair*)

Yes, He intends to ruin us.

CAIN (*hopelessly*)

Perhaps you'd better have a look at it, be sure it's the same kind of thing——

ADAM

Yes . . . quick, before the women get back. Whew! Eve will never get over this if she finds out. We thought we'd lived it down. (*He totters across the stage, and he and Cain exeunt through the opening, L. The stage is empty for an instant, during which the baby's cry is again heard. Then Eve's head appears at a corner, rear. She looks, and then whispers over her shoulder.*)

EVE

It's all right. They're not here. (*Eve and Cain's wife reënter from the back, Cain's wife carrying the baby.*) Let me take him again, the darling!

WIFE

I'm afraid he may cry, you see he hasn't had his supper yet.

EVE (*taking the baby*)

Oh, the adorable thing! Oh, he *was* a big baby, a big baby, the loveliest big babblings I *ever* saw. And all those teeth! (*Suddenly panic-stricken:*) What *shall* we do? If Adam knows about this he'll be so upset, he'll *never* get over the shame of it.—What did you say his name is?

ONE ACT PLAYS

WIFE

Enoch.

EVE

That's a lovely name. (*To the baby:*) Oh, you delicious creature, I think you're going to have curly hair, yes, I do.

WIFE

I don't know *what* to do, it's too dreadful. Cain says it's God's curse on us.

EVE (*first looking round to make sure they are not overheard*)

I don't believe God has anything to do with it.—
Of course I don't *know*, you see I was an orphan and no one ever told me about things——

WIFE

Perhaps we ought to ask the Serpent?

EVE

I think there's only one thing to do. It isn't right that a young couple, just starting in on life like you two, should have to bear this burden. I'll take him home with *me*.

WIFE (*snatching the child, fiercely*)

Don't you dare!

EVE

I could pass it off on Adam, somehow. Oh, I'd give *anything* to have another one, myself. (*In a different voice:*) Does Cain know the truth?

EAST OF EDEN

WIFE

No. I told him a bird brought it.—I'll put him out of sight until you've gone.

EVE

Just let me have one more look. (*Takes baby and examines him admiringly.*) Yes, it's just the same. I remember Cain's toes were like that all curly.—But you should have seen Abel! He was even lovelier: he had the softest little dark curls——

WIFE

Do you suppose this sort of thing is going to go on and on—— (*They look at each other, struck with sudden horror. Then Eve speaks in alarm.*)

EVE

Look out! They're coming! (*She hastily hands the baby to Cain's wife, who runs off with it through the opening, L. Adam and Cain come on, rear.*)

CAIN (*embarrassed*)

Oh . . . here you are. We were looking for you. (*Adam and Eve look at each other uncertainly, each doubtful what to say.*)

EVE

I think your little home is lovely . . . so—so complete.

ADAM (*trying to learn whether Eve has seen the baby*)

Oh. Did she show you around?

EVE

Yes. Everything so nicely arranged.

ONE ACT PLAYS

ADAM

Where's—what *is* your wife's name, Cain?

CAIN

Her name? Why—I just call her Dear.

EVE

Adam, you'd better *give* her a name. (*Trying to make conversation, to Cain.*) He's good at that you know: God made him name all the animals in Eden. It was really quite a compliment.

ADAM

I shall call her Jenny.

CAIN

Jenny?

ADAM

Yes. Short for Genesis.—Where is she?

EVE

She was here a minute ago.

ADAM

I'll go and look for her. (*Starts toward opening.*)

EVE (*anxiously detaining him*)

Oh, no, Father, we ought to be going.

ADAM

You go first, I'll catch up with you. I don't like to leave without seeing—without saying good-bye.

EVE

You know we ought to get home before the Cherubim light up.

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CAIN (*eager to get Eve off the premises*)

I hate to have you leave, Mother, but of course you've got quite a way to go—— (*The baby cries, off L.*)

ADAM (*hastily*)

Dear me, what a noise those goats make——

CAIN

Oh, I've forgotten to feed them. Excuse me—— (*He hurries off through opening. Adam and Eve look at each other queerly.*)

EVE

I like Jenny. I think Cain was very lucky.

ADAM

I suppose so. As lucky as any one can be with God's curse pursuing him.

EVE

It reminds me of *our* old days.

ADAM

What does?

EVE

Why . . . seeing them together.

ADAM

You'd better start. I'll put your shoes on for you. (*He gets them.*)

EVE

I *won't* go alone. You know how I hate walking past those Cherubin, they always make faces at me——

ONE ACT PLAYS

ADAM

I'll be right after you. I'm just going to help Cain feed the live-stock——

EVE (*deciding to trick him*)

All right. (*She puts on her sandals.*)

ADAM

Straight down the hill, and I'll catch you before you get to the river—— (*Eve goes off at the back. Adam looks round and with surprising briskness hobbles to the opening, L.*)

ADAM (*in a loud whisper*)

Cain!

CAIN (*appears at opening*)

Yes?

ADAM

Eve's gone. Where is it? Hurry! (*Cain disappears an instant, and then returns carrying the baby's ark which he places on the ground. Adam looks at the child with mingled horror and delight.*) It's the same.—It looks just the way you did. Yes, we're ruined, done for. This is God's punishment.—Can I pick it up?

CAIN (*with the indifference of despair*)

Sure. (*Adam gingerly takes the baby and dandles it awkwardly. It emits a yell.*)

ADAM

Same kind of noise, too.—There, there, there, hush, hush!—My, how this takes me back!—Was he a fine baby, a beyootiful chilluns, hey?—Oh, this is terrible, this'll kill Eve, she'll never

EAST OF EDEN

get over it.—Has it got the right number of toes? (*Sits down, puts the baby's foot against his own, compares the number.*) Yes, quite all right.—Who would have thought that God would be so revengeful?—Such a big fine handsome baby. Hi itty itty. Oh, what a pity! (*Getting more excited he kneels on all fours making humorous faces at the infant.*) Look at all those toofens, by Jehovah. And such nice straight legs, he'll be a big fellow when he grows up.—Look here, my poor boy, it's too bad for you and Jenny to have your little home broken up like this. . . . Suppose I take him off your hands.—Eve wouldn't mind so much if she thought it was our own. I'll tell her I found him out in the woods——

CAIN

No! I'll take my own punishment.

ADAM.

Well, then, lend him to me just for to-night. I'd like to show him off to those stuck-up Cherubim.

CAIN

My wife wouldn't hear of it. If you want a baby, find one of your own.

ADAM (*still cajoling the infant*)

Yum yum yum, googly-goo.—I think he looks rather like me. What's his name?

CAIN

Enoch.—Enoch C. Adamson.

ONE ACT PLAYS

ADAM

Well, if you see that bird around again, let me know. I could do with another of these. Eden's been lonely since you and Abel grew up.

CAIN (*encouraged by Adam's enthusiasm*)

This is what he likes. Look, Enoch. (*He gets down on the floor, sticks up his legs, and then turns a backward somersault. Adam is sitting on the ground bouncing the baby, and uttering such inane remarks as "There! See that! Wasn't that a wonderful? Oh, what a baby!" At this moment Eve and Cain's wife appear at the back and stand transfixed with horror. Cain and Adam finally become aware of the two women, and look at them in consternation.*)

EVE

Adam!—*What* would God say if He could see you now . . .

ADAM (*after a sheepish pause*)

I thought you were on your way home.—I tried to spare you this.

EVE

That's not the way to hold him. You'll break his back. Here, let me—— (*She takes the baby from him.*) I thought this was a curse, and here you are, simply revelling in it. (*Cain and Adam look at each other, greatly ashamed.*) I do believe he looks like you.

ADAM

Well, don't blame me for it. It was that awful bird again.

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CAIN

Mother, please don't be too disgusted with us. Really, it's not our fault.—At any rate, *Jenny* had nothing to do with it.

ADAM

Let me have him again. I want to feel how heavy he is——

EVE

Nonsense. You might drop him.

ADAM

But it feels so interesting to be the father of the father of a baby. I'll have to think of a name——

EVE

He's got a name.

ADAM

I mean, a name for how it feels to be its father's father. It feels grand . . . that's what I'll call it, grandfather!

WIFE

That poor child will be *starved* if he doesn't get his supper pretty soon.

ADAM

I'll bet that God had this all doped out. (*With a sudden air of discovery.*) Why, I shouldn't wonder if this sort of thing is going to go right on. More and more of 'em, all the time. You see? More people—how simple!

EVE

For you. Yes.

ONE ACT PLAYS

ADAM (*greatly elated*)

Hot dog! Won't that be wonderful!—I must tell the Serpent about this.

CAIN (*hopefully*)

Perhaps it isn't a curse, after all.—I'm going to tell you something. You've both been so busy thinking about the baby, you haven't noticed—
(*He pushes up the long hair on his forehead shows his brow.*)

ADAM and EVE (*aghast*)

The brand! It's gone!

(*Cain bows assent, with a sort of mixed humility and fearful pride.*)

WIFE

Yes, that terrible red mark on his forehead—after Enoch came it went away. That's why we thought the baby was to take its place—another sign of God's anger—— (*The baby cries.*)

ADAM

The mark of shame is gone! (*Raises his eyes.*)
Oh, Jehovah, great are thy works. (*In exultation:*) Why maybe this family will amount to something, after all.

EVE

Not unless the children get their food regularly. (*To Cain's wife:*) My dear, I think that's such a wonderful idea of yours, to wash his little cup every time after using it. I never thought of that.

EAST OF EDEN

ADAM

Well, we ought to be going. It'll be dark.

CAIN

Why don't you stay overnight? We've got a couple of extra skins.

EVE (*to Adam*)

Do you think we could? Then perhaps Jenny would let me give Enoch his bath in the morning——

ADAM

We will! It's none of the Cherubim's business anyhow.

WIFE

Come along, Mother, you can help me put him to bed—— (*Eve and Cain's wife off, with the baby*).

(The dusk is deepening outside, but over Eden the light still glows and the tall Tree is luminous in the sunset. Adam goes toward the rear and looks off at the view.)

CAIN (*pointing off*)

You see, that's where I'm laying out my city. The main street will be right along there. There's a fine view. I always notice how that big Tree shines in the sunset.

ADAM

The Tree . . . Yes . . .

CAIN

Is it really so that God told you not to go near it?

ONE ACT PLAYS

ADAM

Yes; and I begin to see why. He told us that to make sure that we would. (*He turns away from the view and comes forward, thoughtfully, to the baby's ark, and looks at it affectionately.*) There's just one thing—I think you might have named him after me!

CURTAIN

